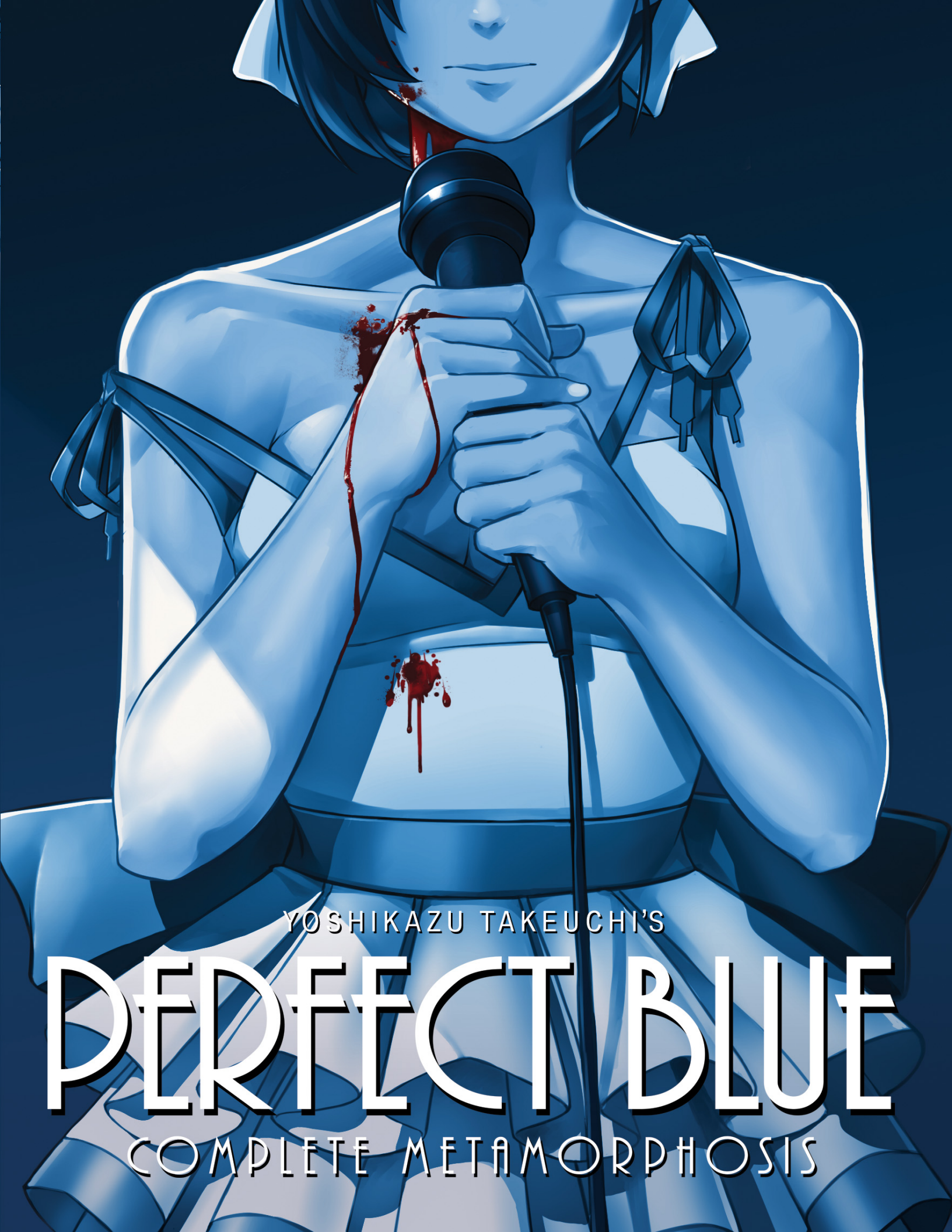
YOSHIKAZU TAKEUCHI'S
PERFECT BLUE
COMPLETE METAMORPHOSIS

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PERFECT BLUE: COMPLETE METAMORPHOSIS

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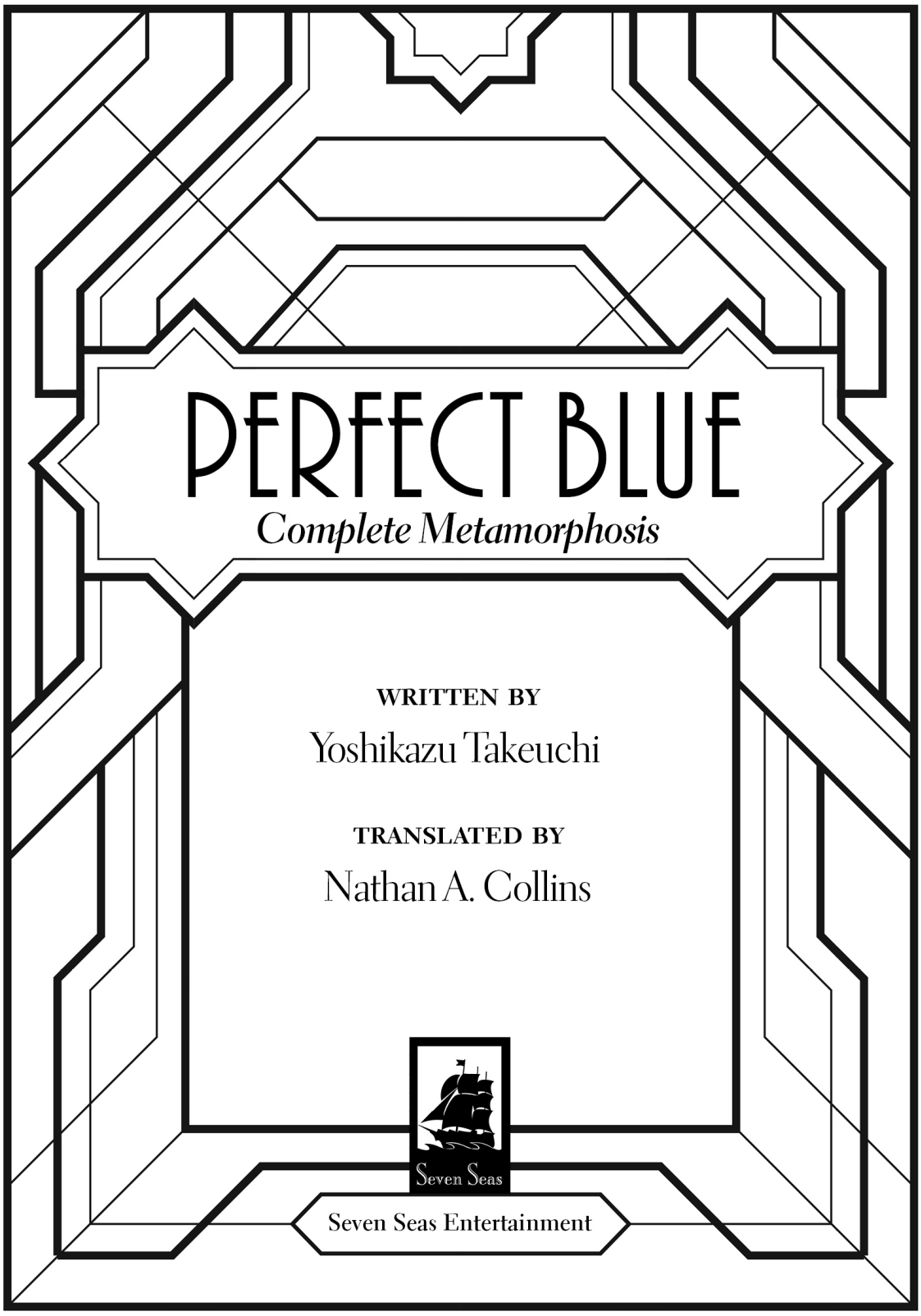

# PERFECT BLUE

*Complete Metamorphosis*

**WRITTEN BY**

Yoshikazu Takeuchi

**TRANSLATED BY**

Nathan A. Collins

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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# Chapter 1
# BEGINNING

Yumiko gazed at the western sky, where cinnabar slowly consumed the blue.

Sitting in the playground sandbox, Yumiko looked around with a wide, youthful gaze, her eyes colored by the sunset—and by worry. The swings and the slide sat vacant. The jungle gym lay emptied of its swarming climbers. Cold metal bars stood against the sunset sky in stark relief.

Eri-chan, Hitoshi-kun, and Megu-chan had all left. Everyone had gone home.

Yumiko hurriedly got to her feet, then straightened her sweater and brushed the sand from her white socks and plaid pleated skirt. *I was almost done, too,* she thought.

Before her in the sandbox stood a nearly complete European-style castle. The sculpture lacked only one detail—a moat—that kept her from feeling satisfied with her creation. The scoop in her hand would put one there easily.

The girl stared at the sand castle for a moment. Then she made up her mind—she tossed her scoop back into the sand. Despite the temptation, Yumiko felt too alone, too vulnerable to stay. She pictured her mother's worried face and thought, *I have to get home.*

Another evening not so long ago, Yumiko had come home late. Her mother's scolding had been especially severe. "You need to learn to be more responsible!" she'd said, eyebrows pulled so tight together that wrinkles formed between them. "You'll be going to grade school next year."

Hastened by the memory of that expression, she headed for the park's entrance. She knew the way. First, under the flower-laden arbor, then past the small fountain. She saw the entrance just ahead. Her pace picked up to a jog.

And then it happened.

A man appeared, blocking the entrance before her. Yumiko stopped in her tracks.

The sky had darkened, but not so much that she couldn't see what he looked like. The man was dressed in a whitish T-shirt and baggy jeans. He wore faintly dirty leather shoes. On the front of his T-shirt, a cute, anime-style girl looked back at her. The girl was from a TV show Yumiko had watched many times, but she couldn't remember the character's name. The setting sun, directly behind the stranger's face, obscured his features in relative darkness. The effect only made him more unnerving.

Yumiko looked down to avoid meeting the man's eyes and started to trot past him.

But, in an instant, he bent over, put his hand on her shoulder—and then he was behind her, his arms pinning her against his body. Yumiko grunted. He tightened his grip. The animal stench of his breath assaulted her nostrils.

Yumiko knew she was in danger. She kicked with her legs and tried to shake free from the stranger's grasp. But the more she struggled, the deeper his hands dug into the softness of her skin.

"Ojouchan,"—*little girl*—he said, his voice weak and unimpressive, oddly scratchy and high pitched. "Ojouchan."

Yumiko felt she had heard that voice before. But where?

"Ojouchan," the stranger said again.

*In the darkness,* Yumiko thought, the memory sending shivers through her. *I heard it in the dark. I heard it in the dark of night.*

The night she had heard that voice counted among her earliest memories. The voice had made her so scared that she cried. When her mother came into her room to see what was wrong, Yumiko flung herself against her and sobbed, "Mama, I heard a strange voice."

Her mother switched on the nightstand light and tried to reassure her with a gentle smile. "Yumiko," she said, hugging her child tight, "that's your grandfather's voice. His spirit has come to be by your side."

"No," Yumiko said, shaking her head. "It's not Grandpa."

Her grandfather had passed away the year she was born, and she didn't know what his voice had sounded like—but she knew that the scratchy, high-pitched voice in the dark wasn't his.

"It's not him," Yumiko said, now shaking her head more forcefully. "It's a monster, Mama. It's a monster! I know it is!"

Her mother's arms tightened around her. "Yumiko, Yumiko, calm down."

Yumiko tried to wriggle free. "Mama, you're hurting me! Let me go! You're hurting me!"

Her mother's arms gripped her even tighter.

"Don't struggle. Don't struggle!" Suddenly, her mother's voice was scratchy and high-pitched. "Don't struggle!"

Yumiko opened her eyes in shock and saw the reality in front of her —long greasy hair and a craggy face every bit as real as the foul, bestial smell that accompanied them.

"Don't struggle. Be a good girl." He drew his face closer to her, and the fierce stench enveloped her. His eyes, timid yet vulgar, blinked rapidly. His oversized nose flared with every breath. "If you behave, I won't hurt you."

He pushed out his tongue and ran it across the surface of his lips. That red, swollen organ could have been a mollusk at the bottom of a sea.

Yumiko felt her body go slack. Deep down, she realized that no matter how hard she resisted, she would never escape his grip.

He scooped up her body with ease and carried her into the thicket.

Yumiko's mind, distant now, wondered where she was being taken. For some reason, she felt oddly calm—like she was no longer herself.

# Chapter 2
# SQUIRM

## I

Kirigoe Mima turned off the shower and listened. Her phone was ringing.

She shrugged, as if to say, *What can you do?* Then she took a towel off the rack and wrapped it around her body. She opened the glass door to the shower; the phone's ringing became louder.

*Who's calling at this hour?*

Mima glanced at the clock. It was after two in the morning. The caller was likely her manager, perhaps to tell her about a change in the next day's schedule. *I wish he wouldn't call me so late,* Mima thought, irritation etching a tiny crease between her eyebrows.

She stepped into the combined bedroom/living room of her studio apartment and put her hand on the phone beside her bed. She lifted the receiver and spoke in a tone that hid none of her annoyance. "Yes, who is it?"

She expected to hear her manager's familiar rough voice—but instead, all she heard was soft breathing. *Huff. Huff.*

Mima let out an exasperated sigh. Not *this* again.

"Hello?" She spoke firmly. "Who is this?"

*Huff. Huff. Huff.* The breathing grew heavier.

For over the past week or so, she'd been getting harassed incessantly by calls like these. Mima wondered how this person had found her personal number. As far as she knew, it hadn't been published anywhere. She clicked her tongue in exasperation.

Then, a faint voice came over the line. "Mi-Mima-san… Mima-san…"

The man's muffled voice reverberated in her ears. Something in it sounded desperate.

"Mima-san…" *Huff. Huff.* Now the man seemed to be crying, too.

Fear urged Mima to hang up the phone, but the next thing she knew, she was pressing the receiver tightly to her ear. "Mima-san," the man began. Agitation strengthened his voice; it took on a strange, raspy edge. "Do you understand how I feel? Do you? I want to save you, Mima-san. Mima-san, *Mima-san*!"

Fear put a tremor in her, but she felt compelled to speak—as if something still more frightful would happen to her if she didn't. "Just who are you?" she asked her unknown caller. "What do you mean, you'll save me?"

The man, caught off guard by her reaction, choked out a weak "Urp!" but then continued. "I'm… I'm your fan. I'm a huge fan of yours, Kirigoe Mima." *Huff. Huff.*

From the sound of his voice, even talking to her was a great ordeal. Mima threw force behind her words. "If you're my fan, then why do you keep harassing me with these calls?"

Perhaps intimidated into silence, the man said nothing. The receiver went quiet, save for the faint sound of his breathing.

Her voice rose to an angry shout. "If you don't have anything else to say, I'm hanging up!"

"I-I… I want to save you," the man mumbled. "I want to save you before you go down the wrong path. I'm not trying to bother you. Honestly, I'm not."

She'd had enough of this. His cowering tone rubbed her the wrong way, and besides, with only a bath towel wrapped around her, she was starting to get cold. "*Listen*, whoever you are." Mima spoke with finality. "I don't need you to save me. I'll decide my 'path' on my own. So please, just stop calling me."

She was about to hang up the phone when the man shouted, "Wait! Don't hang up!"

Then, words spilling out quickly, he went on. His voice was shrilly pitched now, and he rambled like a sick man, a man taken by malarial fever dreams. “I’m coming to meet you. I promise I’ll come to you soon. I’ll come to you, and I’ll save you. I promise I will.”

Mima hung up the phone frantically. Her body trembled down to the core.

## II

“This is just awful,” Mima said, batting her wide, round eyes. She raised a hand to her slender nose and took in a deep, stuffed-up snuffle. “Of all the times to catch a cold, why *now*?”

Mima’s assistant, Yasuda Rumi, had been keeping an eye on the singer. Now Rumi hurried to her in the corner of the studio. “Mima-san,” Rumi said, “would you like me to bring you some hot coffee?”

Mima gave her a pleasant smile. “That would be great, Rumi-chan. With plenty of milk, please.”

“Will do!” Rumi replied. She jogged over to the vending machine in the back of the room and soon returned with the drink.

As Mima drank her coffee, her manager, Tadokoro Bon, entered the studio, bleary-eyed.

Mima put her hand in the shape of a glass and mimed drinking. “Out late again, Bon-chan?”

Tadokoro tossed her an embarrassed grin and ran a hand through his hair, already thinning at the ripe old age of thirty-six. “I can’t help it,” he said. “It’s part of the job.”

With a teasing smile, Mima said, “Working day and night for me, is that it?”

Tadokoro winked a long-lashed eye at her. “Rumi-chan, get me a coffee too, please.” The manager brought a metal folding chair beside Mima and plopped himself down. The cheap metal seat protested with a

shrill and dubious creak. More serious now, Tadokoro said, “I hear you’re feeling under the weather.”

“I think it’s a cold,” Mima said with another loud sniff. “But that’s not *all* that’s bothering me—I got a strange call last night.”

Tadokoro frowned. “A strange call?”

“You remember how I told you about those troubling phone calls I’ve been getting?”

The manager nodded. “You mean the guy who doesn’t say anything?”

“Yeah, him. But this time, he spoke.”

“Well, now. *That’s* bold.” Tadokoro leaned forward, his eyes glimmering with interest. “What did he say?”

“He told me he wanted to save me,” Mima said.

“To *save* you?” Tadokoro echoed, bewildered.

“Apparently, he’s worried I’m headed in the ‘wrong direction.’ He said he’s going to prevent it.”

Tadokoro scowled. “Sounds like a nutcase to me.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I remember thinking something in his voice wasn’t right.” Just remembering sent a shiver through her.

“An overexcited fan,” Tadokoro said dismissively. One corner of his mouth turned up in a wry, long-suffering smile.

“He said he’s coming to meet me.”

Tadokoro’s eyes widened, and he exclaimed, “He said *what*?”

“He wants to meet me,” Mima said. “To talk to me.”

“Now *that* we can’t ignore. When did he say he was coming?”

“He didn’t. But he promised it would be soon.”

The manager put a hand to his chin, closed his eyes, and hummed in thought, but Mima couldn’t be sure just what he was thinking.

## III

It happened when Yasuda Rumi was on her way back to Mima's green room to retrieve something she'd left behind.

In the hallway just outside, the metal door to the emergency exit stood half open, allowing a bar of sunlight to pierce into the darkened hallway. Rumi had never seen that door open, and the anomaly caught the assistant's attention.

Then she saw the figure lurking in the door's shadow.

"Who's there?" Rumi said in a low shout.

Within the pool of shadow, the figure made an even darker shape, save for two glimmering points—the eyes. Someone's eyes, staring right at Rumi.

The figure watched but didn't speak a word.

Rumi's pulse begin to race. Reflexively, she took a step back. Then another. As if following her, the figure stepped out of the shadows, suddenly revealed by the slash of sunlight. It was a man. She could tell that he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, but his face was harshly backlit and impossible to discern.

For a moment, Rumi wondered if he was the assistant director. But an AD would have given some kind of greeting—and besides, the green room was for talent; an AD had no particular business loitering there.

Again, Rumi asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man muttered something deep in his throat.

"Tell me your name!" Rumi demanded, as bravely as she could muster. "If you don't, I'll call for help." She knew that an approach that confrontational might jolt the man to attack. She tensed her muscles, ready for the worst.

Remaining silent, the man approached her on unsteady, drunk-like steps.

Rumi held a hand to her mouth, to keep her scream bottled up inside.

The man staggered closer. He waved a scrap of paper at her. On instinct, she took it.

He bobbed his head at her, then turned on his heels. The next moment, he was fleeing out the emergency exit. The metal door slammed shut behind him.

The hallway went dark.

## IV

Mima watched *Music Town* on the in-house feed of the green room's television monitor. The room was a small, dreary, tatami-matted affair, furnished with only the monitor and a vanity. Whenever work brought her to this station, she typically used the space as her personal lounge. Over time, she'd developed an unexpected fondness for the dingy place.

*Music Town* was doing a segment on this week's hot songs. The program's host was a snobbish, middle-aged man who had been a newscaster before jumping ship for the entertainment world. He was infamous for barraging his guests with bad jokes and fancied himself hilarious. That, however, couldn't have been further from the truth; his guests only laughed out of courtesy.

In short, Mima hated him.

Appearing on the segment was Ochiai Eri, a new pop idol who debuted the year before; she had been an immediate hit. Her latest song, "Rock, Love, Dream!" claimed number three on the charts.

Apparently, according to an idol magazine interview, she viewed Kirigoe Mima as her rival.

"Good evening, Eri-chan," the snobbish, middle-aged host said. "Your new song is a smash. Dare I say that you don't need to worry about Kirigoe Mima anymore?" Behind his glasses, the host's eyes glimmered in a way Mima didn't care for.

"Oh, I don't know about *that*…" Eri demurred, but her smile said otherwise.

Mima stuck out her tongue at the monitor. "Go fall off a bridge," she muttered. She hated them both, the middle-aged host and the full-of-herself newcomer.

Ochiai Eri had supposedly turned sixteen this year, but Mima placed her at eighteen or even older—though, admittedly, the singer's facial features and figure *did* still retain a girlish quality. She appeared innocent enough, but her eyes gave her away.

To put it positively, those eyes shined with a strong-willed ambition. More negatively, they were eyes that saw others not as people, but as tools to be used.

The one and only time Mima had appeared on the same TV show as her, she fell under the withering glare of those eyes. Though three years a veteran, when Mima saw the white-hot flames inside the newcomer's gaze, she felt such a powerful aura of intimidation it was almost tangible. In that moment, Mima knew this woman would do anything to worm her way to the top—even if it meant putting her boot to those who stood in her way.

On the television screen, however, those eyes appeared gentle and kind. It was no wonder her debut single carried the slogan, "Blue-Eyed Angel."

Mima heard once that Eri had badmouthed her off the record. Supposedly she'd called her "old," and asked, "How long is she going to keep up that innocent girl act?"

Mima generally ignored the rookie, instead choosing to keep on being herself, to follow her own path, no matter what anyone else said. But she couldn't help but feel a loathing for that woman. The emotion bubbled up from somewhere deep inside. She'd never felt this way toward another idol before. On the whole, Mima's nature was kind, and she did her best to try to keep less benign emotions from surfacing—but it was a futile effort.

On the monitor, Eri began performing "Rock, Love, Dream!"

Sulking, Mima switched off the monitor and laid her head on the vanity. She couldn't help but feel a little disgusted with herself.

## V

The office of Moon Kids Talent Agency occupied a single unit in a small but sleek apartment building recently built in Roppongi. Aside from the nearby elevated Shuto Expressway, where traffic never ceased, the neighborhood was quiet.

Tadokoro Bon approached the building's entryway with an armful of books. *Not very trendy digs,* he thought with a wry grin. A small, flowering arch over the entrance evoked an atmosphere more akin to a love hotel than an apartment.

Reaching the doorway, Tadokoro sandwiched his books between chin and chest as he punched in his entry code. The indicator light went on, and the door opened smoothly. The manager entered the building's single elevator and pressed the third floor button.

As he waited for the elevator to make its trip, Tadokoro thumbed through his books. His thoughts, however, were drawn inexorably toward the deviant harassing Mima. *The guy must be some kind of freak,* the manager thought. *He says he's going to come see her…but how many people actually follow through on something like that?*

Tadokoro pushed the delusional man from his mind and stepped out of the elevator.

Opening the door to the agency's office at the corner of the hall, Tadokoro found cameraman Murano Yuji already inside, seated in the small reception area. Tadokoro offered him a cheerful, "Good morning, be right with you!" and stepped into the interior office.

His receptionist, a young woman named Tomo, continued reading her memo pad as she acknowledged the manager with a curt but formal, "Morning, sir."

"Tomo-chan, has Mima called?"

Tomo shifted her eyes to the manager. "She said she'll be here soon," she said, then she went right back to the memo pad. Tadokoro suspected the receptionist was going over plans for a date with some guy friend. He returned to the reception area with a wry grin.

He sat on the sofa opposite the cameraman, a table in between them. He lit a cigarette. "Yu-chan," he said, using his nickname for Yuji, "Have you thought about it? Will you do it?"

Yuji ran a hand through his shaggy hair and smiled pleasantly. The photographer's facial features were on the larger side, and he typically came off as stern. When he smiled, though, those thick eyebrows lowered just a little, and it brought a gentleness to his face.

"If Mima-san is up for it, I'm ready any time," Yuji declared crisply.

On the table, Tadokoro spread out his books—magazine-sized photo books of various idols. The market for photo collections was experiencing something of a boom at the moment. Many of the pictures were borderline pornographic. Yuji glanced to Tadokoro, who grinned and nodded.

"A bit of a surprise—huh, Yuji-chan? This is how far the latest idols are going these days. Or rather, if they *don't*, they won't make it as idols for very long."

Yuji frowned with his eyebrows. "I know I don't photograph women particularly often, and I'm not especially familiar with these kinds of collections—but when I think of idols, this isn't at all what I'd imagine."

"Until just a few short years ago, you would have imagined right." Tadokoro extinguished his dwindling cigarette in an ashtray on the table and gazed into the distance.

"Wait a minute," the cameraman said, his eyes locked on the manager. "Surely you're not suggesting that Mima-chan is going to do a photo book like these, are you?"

Tadokoro returned the stare with some surprise. "Of course I am. Why else would I have called you here?"

Yuji slapped his hands to his cheeks and let out a deep breath. "How times change. I still think of her as a kid."

The manager smiled the bitter smile of someone who'd just gulped down a spoonful of stomach medicine. He looked to his wristwatch and said, "She should be here soon."

Then his expression turned serious. He leaned in toward Yuji and added, "Mima and I have already talked it over. She's ready. But it's like you say—she's still a kid in a lot of ways. She's hardly even taken any swimsuit photos, and now suddenly she's jumping to this racy stuff. I know

it’s going to be tough on her. That’s why I asked for you specifically to be the cameraman.”

Yuji understood. Tadokoro’s compassion for Mima in this cutthroat business was painfully apparent.

Yuji was a freelance photojournalist, and his subjects had never been sexual in nature. He’d only recently returned to Japan after covering guerrilla fighters in a Middle Eastern civil war. He’d resolved to take it easy in Japan for a while before another foray among the guerrillas when he received a phone call from his old acquaintance, Tadokoro.

It seemed that no matter how much the manager considered the photo album a necessary part of the job, he refused to put Mima in the hands of a photographer who viewed women as mere merchandise. Yuji had little interest in working on an idol photo book, but once he understood his old acquaintance’s feelings, a heartfelt determination welled up within him.

He had made up his mind—for Tadokoro, he would capture both sides of Kirigoe Mima—the incredibly cute and the incredibly sexy.

## VI

Mima exited the taxi into total darkness. Aging streetlights stood here and there along a stone retaining wall, but most of their lightbulbs had burned out, leaving them derelict of their duty.

She leaned into the open taxi door and spoke to Rumi, still seated within. “Would you like to come up? If you’ve got something else to do, that’s all right, but I have something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“That would be great,” Rumi said. “I’ve got something to talk to you about, too.” Blushing a little, she stepped out from the taxi. Her pleasantly rounded eyes seemed alight with happiness.

*Oh, that’s right,* Mima realized, *I’ve never invited her to my place before.* “You like black tea—don’t you, Rumi-chan?” she asked. “I’ll put on some Earl Grey for you.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Rumi said. She wrapped herself around Mima’s arm and grinned like a spoiled child. The redness in her cheeks had

spread all the way to her ears.

*Isn't that cute,* Mima thought, feeling a bit like an older sister.

Stepping into the one-room apartment, Rumi exclaimed, "Your place is so clean!"

The room was, in fact, clean and tidy—not stiflingly sterile, but relaxing and inviting. In that way, the space reflected its owner's character: strict with herself, kind to others.

Rumi sat in front of the big-screen 32-inch TV and gazed at the glass tube with admiration. "Wow, this is nice," she said. "Really nice. I wish I had a big TV like this. Watching it must be *intense*."

"Not really," Mima replied, as she filled the electric kettle with water. "You get used to it after awhile, and it stops feeling impressive."

"Oh!" Rumi exclaimed. "Mima-san, Mima-san!"

Rumi seemed to have discovered something. Mima knew what her assistant had found even without looking."You like anime too—don't you, Rumi-chan?"

"Like it? I *love* it."

Rumi had found Mima's laserdisc collection. It was quite a large collection that consisted almost entirely of anime—from Toei animated classics like *Magic Boy* and *The Wonderful World of Puss 'n Boots* to more recent movies, such as *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *Grave of the Fireflies*. If an anime had been pressed onto one of those record-sized video discs, she probably had it.

Among their number were several foreign animated films unknown to Rumi. As an anime fan herself, the discovery made her as excited as a child.

Happy to see the enthusiasm, Mima said, "You're welcome to come watch them whenever you're free. You can stay up all night, if you want to."

"R-really?" Rumi said. "I'd love to. Absolutely!"

Mima found Rumi's bubbly enthusiasm charming. Rumi had joined Moon Kids as an aspiring idol singer. She'd pushed past her parents' protestations and moved to Tokyo from her rural hometown, which must have required a level of determination rare among her peers. Tadokoro put together several trial projects for her, but ultimately, Rumi simply didn't have what it took to become an idol. She was more than cute enough to make the cut, and she possessed the drive, too—but she was missing that certain spark.

When she realized she would never be an idol, Rumi kept on at Moon Kids as a member of the staff. She was a hard worker and quickly made the mental switch to her new role. Soon, the agency assigned her to be Mima's assistant.

Rumi never said a sour or blue word about her shattered dreams, and she gave her assignment her all. Even so, Mima worried about saying or doing something that might tear open Rumi's old wounds, and consequently, she'd kept a certain distance from her assistant. But now that Mima knew of their shared passion for anime, she suddenly felt the gap between them shrink. She thought Rumi might have felt it, too.

Mima poured some of her fine Earl Grey tea into a cup and added plenty of milk before offering the drink to Rumi. Her assistant took a sip, then happily scrunched her eyebrows into an adorable face. "Yum! It's really good."

As Mima watched her helper's earnest expression, she felt keenly aware of how being an idol had changed her—into someone more focused on reading the room than conveying her true emotions—and that awareness saddened her.

Being an idol was a nerve wracking job. An idol always had to smile and pay strict attention to her behavior. The media was always hunting for a scandal, and the fans could get nasty. Spurred by those thoughts, her mind replayed the voice that tormented her over the telephone. The memory sullied an otherwise peaceful, if bittersweet moment.

Mima had only been an idol for three years, but mentally, she felt like an old woman, well over thirty. She doubted she could ever be as unguarded as Rumi again.

*What would happen to me if I quit?* Mima wondered.

She took a drink from her own cup of Earl Grey and kept her deep sigh bottled up inside.

Some time later, Mima held a wine glass. Her words came out just slightly slurred. “Rumi-chan, I’m going to do a photo book. You’ve heard, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Tadokoro-san told me.”

“And what did he tell you about it?”

“Well, he said you were putting out a photo book…”

Mima pressed, “That’s all he said?”

“That’s all he said,” Rumi said.

Mima hummed in thought. She swirled her wine slowly, a seemingly subconscious action. Then she said, “Here’s the thing—the photo album, it’s going to be really racy.”

“Racy?” Rumi said, blinking rapidly.

“You know, sexy. Dirty. We had the planning meeting today. Bon-chan said that if I’m going to do a photo book, I’ve got to really go for it.” Mima grinned. “Maybe even full frontal.”

Rumi looked uncertain as to how she ought to respond. Cautiously, she said, “And did you agree to it?”

“Of *course* I did. These days, an idol can’t survive on just being cute.”

Rumi bobbed her head in understanding, but her expression carried a hint of dejection.

Mima continued. “What I wanted to talk with you about was how far I should go. How much do you think I should expose?”

Rumi took in the question, then said with tact, “You know better than I do, but I think you should hold back as much as you can. You’re still selling singles and albums as you are now.”

“Fifty thousand copies, maybe.”

“Then I think you shouldn’t change your image too much. I’d rather Kirigoe Mima remain the pure girl. And…” Rumi stopped herself.

“And?” Mima prodded softly.

Rumi turned her face away and covered it behind her hands.

“Rumi-chan, what’s wrong? If there’s something you want to say, you can say it.”

Mima took Rumi’s hand. Rumi shook her head from side to side. After a moment, she seemed to have gathered herself, and she looked Mima in the eye and said, “Mima-san. Please don’t be mad at me when I tell you this.” Her eyes were serious. She pressed on. “I’m… I’m worried about your fans.”

“My fans? You mean that my current fans might leave me,” Mima said, failing to see why that had gotten Rumi so shaken up. “We’ll deal with that if it happens. If I worried about that sort of thing, I’d never be able to do anything.”

“No,” Rumi said with a big shake of her head. “That’s not it. I’m not worried about *those* fans. I’m worried about the…obsessive fans.”

*Obsessive fans.* Mima’s expression stiffened. *What is she trying to tell me? She couldn’t mean…*

Thoughts of the man on the phone returned to her again.

Her voice rising, Mima demanded, “Just who are you talking about?”

“Some of your fans don’t like the idea of you changing your image,” Rumi said.

“Sure they don’t, but so what? Who cares about what those fans think?”

“But… but…” Rumi was shaking her head more fiercely now. “Mima-san, please listen to me. The truth is… the truth is…”

Crying, Rumi told Mima about her encounter with the shadowy figure outside the green room.

“I didn’t think I was ever going to have to tell you,” Rumi said, sniffling. “I thought he was just some freak. But I couldn’t stop thinking about it, and I read the letter he gave me. And—and…”

Mima could never have imagined someone like that could have gotten so close to her—right outside the room where she herself had been. “What did it say?” Mima demanded, half shouting. “Tell me, what did it say?”

Reluctantly, Rumi dug through her purse and withdrew a crumpled scrap of paper.

Mima took the page—snatched it, really. “This is his letter?”

It was a perfectly ordinary piece of stationery. She placed the paper on the table and carefully smoothed it out. The words had been written with a ballpoint pen. She poured over the message, intently focused.

The more she read, the more the color drained from her face.

*Dear Mima-sama:*

*I expect that you might never read this letter.*

*That’s because I am unable to mail it to you. I don’t know your address. I’ve tried as best I can to learn it, but to no avail.*

*I found your phone number from your appearance on Oshare Fifties. (You may recall the segment where you called your own answering machine. I recorded it on video tape and played it back hundreds of times until I figured out your number. It was a lot of hard work.) I thought I might be able to look up your address from the phone number, but that ended up being wasted effort.*

*That’s when I got the idea to go meet you directly at the television station and hand deliver this letter.*

*But that might not be possible. There is a chance you will never read this letter, but I am writing it with the belief that you will read my message to you.*

*Here it is.*

*Please stay the way you are.*

*I hope you will never change and that you will always stay the same.*

*I heard a rumor—which I highly doubt is based on any merit—among a fraction of your devoted fans that you are going to put out a risqué photo book. Personally, I can't believe such a nasty rumor.*

*But if someone is pressuring you, forcing you to do it against your will, I will stake my life to protect you.*

*You are Kirigoe Mima.*

*Please go on being Kirigoe Mima.*

*If you were to change, I don't know what I would do. I might even lose myself completely… The next thing I know, we both could be dead. I don't want that to happen, so please, stay as you are.*

*Sincerely,*
*Your Darling Rose*

*P.S. I'm worried that this letter might not reach you. I will call you soon to find out. I promise.*

When she'd finished reading the letter, Mima glared at Rumi and shouted, hysterical, "Rumi-chan, why did you hide this letter from me? Why didn't you tell anyone about that man?"

Rumi shook her head like a little child scolded by her mother. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I was wrong. I…"

Mima took in a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. She took several such breaths until she gradually felt more in control.

Seeing Rumi a sobbing wreck before her, Mima realized this was no time to let her own emotions run away from her. *Rumi kept quiet because she didn't want to upset me,* Mima told herself. *She was only trying to do right by me.*

Mima gently grasped Rumi's hand and said, "Rumi-chan, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you. It's all right now. I won't yell at you anymore. You can relax."

Rumi squeezed Mima’s hand back tightly, then looked at the idol with teary eyes and said, “I-I was scared. That man scared me. There was something wrong about him—something really *wrong*.”

Mima put her arms around Rumi and hugged her tight. “It’s all right. It’s all right,” she said, as much to herself as to her assistant. “He can’t come here. We’re safe.”

Rumi was nodding, her head against Mima’s chest, when the phone’s ring split the night.

Mima’s body stiffened. Her heart threatened to jump from her throat.

*I will call you soon to find out,* the ominous letter had said.

Mima reached for the receiver.

Rumi jolted as if she had touched a high-voltage current. “Don’t answer,” she shouted. “You can’t answer! It might be him…”

Mima pulled back her hand. The two women, frozen like statues in their embrace, stared at the phone as its ringing droned ominously on.

# Chapter 3
# SEARCH

## I

Ring. Ring. The sound of the phone on the other end came through the receiver.

Each ring was another dagger in the man's chest.

His emotions had been thrown into disarray. One moment, he worried what he would do if she answered. The next, he worried what he would do if she didn't—and back and forth again.

A minute ago, he had intended not to call her. He didn't want to cause her any distress if it could be at all avoided. But he couldn't stop wondering if she had read his letter, and—a blush tinged his dark complexion—he wanted to hear her voice, even if only for a fleeting moment.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* The phone had sounded over twenty times now.

He was positive she must be home. It was after midnight. *Surely* she was home by now. He possessed nearly complete knowledge of her schedule, gleaned from fan magazines and other sources. Her only appearance today had been as a guest on a radio show.

If she was out having fun with someone—the very thought sent another sharp pang through his chest—she would have left her answering machine on.

*Could it be?* The man ran his bony fingers back and forth through his long, unkempt hair. *Could she be pretending not to be home?*

*No,* the man told himself. *She wouldn't do that to me.*

He thought of Mima's manager, that ugly, bald, middle-aged bastard. *Maybe she's assuming it's her manager calling.*

Thinking of how Mima must feel, having to dodge phone calls just to escape her manager, the man pitied her. He suspected the manager was a

source of constant harassment. As the phone rang for the thirtieth time, a righteous indignation sprang to life.

He wished he could go to her this very moment and comfort her.

Just before the fortieth ring, the man finally gave up and placed the receiver back in its cradle. *There's only so much I can do by phone. I have to find her address. I need to meet her in person.*

Thinking about how badly he wanted to meet her, he hugged his arms around his chest. Waves of bittersweet emotion flooded him, almost tickling.

The man had never been in love. He had no way of knowing what love felt like. But when he thought of her, his heart seemed to flutter, and he wondered if what he was feeling might be the same as love.

Then, as had happened every time that notion crossed his mind, a dark and blue emotion raised its head from somewhere deep inside him.

*It's not love!* he told himself, flatly rejecting the idea. *It's not. It's not love!* The corners of his lips trembled in disapproval. *I exist to save her. I exist to prevent her from going down the wrong path.* He looked to the life-sized poster of Kirigoe Mima he kept on his wall. Youthful and pure, she smiled back at him.

*I am here to protect that smile,* he reminded himself. *I must never forget that.*

That reminder finally allowed him to regain control of his nerves—but he'd seen inside himself and found a man who needed to be more composed. When he saw that man, a bottomless terror came over him. He trembled like a little girl who had seen a ghost.

He didn't want to witness his own weakness. He wanted to be a strong man, if only when it came to her.

The man retrieved a video tape from the rows upon rows of cassettes that filled the shelving unit. The tape contained a recording of Kirigoe Mima at the very beginning of her career. Among its contents were even some of the lessons she took before her debut.

The man inserted the tape into the VCR and switched on his 29-inch TV. With a dull electric hum, the screen came to life.

Beside the TV stood more shelves, also stuffed full of tapes, and topped with a seemingly careless pile of the things. In fact, tapes were everywhere in the modest, six tatami-mat-sized room, and almost every one contained footage of idol singers. Only one space remained vacant amid the mountains of cassettes and that was where the man sat.

Though the piles appeared disorganized, the man knew the exact location of each and every recording. Eyes still locked on the TV, upon which a rookie Mima sang, the man reached automatically for another tape.

This one contained his most recent recording of Mima. He put the tape into a second VCR and switched on a smaller TV adjacent to the larger one. On the small display appeared the Mima of today. On the larger one was Mima as she had debuted.

Kirigoe Mima was known for largely sticking to the same image throughout her career—but compared side-by-side, the changes were significant and unmistakable.

The man clenched his teeth and fought back his surging emotions. To him, the best Mima was the one directly after her debut. He almost wished she had never become a pop idol, though he felt strange thinking that way.

The singer had survived childhood without losing her innocence; to submerge her in the polluted waters of the entertainment industry could only be described as the devil’s work. If she hadn’t become an idol, she likely would have remained the same person forever.

The man believed that would have been the happiest outcome, both for her and for himself.

Then again, if she had never become an idol, he never would have known her.

Filled with mixed emotions, he watched the current Mima, a much more mature woman than she had been upon her debut. Softly he whispered, the words coming from deep within, “I don’t want you to change any more.”

This most recent Mima had changed just about as much as he could tolerate.

He didn’t want to acknowledge it—he really didn’t—but he couldn’t avoid the truth. She carried an air of sexuality now. It wasn’t yet so strong that he couldn’t bear it—for now, he could endure. But he couldn’t let it get any stronger.

He didn’t want to see his most precious person succumb to corruption. That was why he needed to save her—no matter who tried to stand in his way.

He understood her better than anyone else. If he didn’t rescue her, then who would?

He was prepared to give his life, if that’s what it took to save her. He just didn’t know how it could be done. He had spent days thinking of nothing else. Time was running out. If he didn’t act soon, she would become someone other than herself.

The man reached for a plain paper bag on his desk. From inside the bag, he withdrew a long, skinny object wrapped in a piece of cloth. When his eyes rest upon the cloth, relief softened his expression.

Slowly, he unwrapped it. The contents fell onto the desk with a dull thud.

It was a knife with a white grip and a long, gleaming blade. He gripped the weapon by the handle, and his mouth twisted into a smile.

This was it. If all else failed, this was how he could save her.

For that reason, he cherished the knife deeply. He patted the flat side of the blade against his cheek and took pleasure in the sensation of cold metal against his skin.

## II

Mima felt a bit feverish; she wondered if it was because she hadn’t been getting enough sleep. Usually she felt excited before recording a song,

but instead she felt blue. She'd been in poor form lately, and it was all that freak's doing.

Not only had he called her, he'd gotten a letter to her as well—going so far as trespassing in the television studio. It was too much for her to forgive. At first, when Rumi told her about the stalker's visit, Mima had been overcome by incredible terror. But now, the fear had turned to anger.

Whoever this obsessive fan was, he was probably a bitter, pathetic excuse of a man, someone who never went out on dates, never played any sports, and just sat shut away in his room all alone. When she pictured him in her mind, the image filled her with bristling irritation.

Though the more unsavory type of fan had been more prevalent in the past, these days, the men who followed idols were a mostly pleasant sort. Fan or not, she wished the police—or anyone, really—would crack down on all the nasty ones like him.

She couldn't even relax in her own bed anymore. How could she, when he could call again at any moment? Each time her phone rang, her heart froze for just a second. Even worse, he might have tracked down her address by now. What if he came in person?

She made a sour face, like she'd just stepped on a slug with her bare foot.

Sniffling, Mima told Rumi, "I've decided to tell Bon-chan."

With her hair artlessly gathered in the back and her face showing little if any makeup (though naturally still cute), her outward appearance spoke of an inner weariness.

Rumi set a cup of coffee in front of the idol. The assistant nodded and said, teary-eyed, "I was wrong for thinking to keep it to myself. I hope you can forgive me…"

"It's fine, Rumi-chan. What's done is done. The person I can't forgive is that creep. Look at all the trouble he's caused us—that so called 'Darling Rose.' Give me a break!"

When Mima debuted as an idol, she'd been given the slightly offbeat English tagline, "The Charming Rose." That must have been where the man

came up with his pen name.

“I’m going to talk with Bon-chan,” Mima said. “We’ll come up with a plan. I’ve told him about this guy before. Bon-chan thought he was merely some dreary, miserable fan and that we should just leave him be. But now that this freak came into the studio, we can’t ignore him anymore.”

Mima balled one hand into a fist and punched at the air. “If he shows up in front of me, I’ll beat the living daylights out of him.”

Mima grinned devilishly, and Rumi, taken in by the smile, formed a small one of her own. The sight came as a relief to the idol, who hadn’t seen her assistant smile since the night Rumi admitted to hiding the letter.

Rumi said, “And if I see him again, I’ll grab him with my own two hands and give him what he has coming.”

“That’s the spirit,” Mima said. “You know he’s bound to be a total wimp. If we stand up to him, he’ll go running with his tail between his legs.”

Mima gave Tadokoro the letter to read. Later, in a small storage room at the rear of the recording studio, perched upon folding chairs, Mima and Rumi told him what had happened at the television station.

“Did you see his face?” he asked, drawing in one corner of his mouth and pushing air out through his teeth.

“No. The light was coming in directly behind him.”

Tadokoro downed the rest of his now tepid coffee and ran his hands through his thinning hair. He glanced at Mima, who gave him the sort of smile that didn’t really say anything.

Tadokoro said, “This guy must be a fan—albeit a crazed one. He’ll have shown himself at concerts and events. Rumi-chan, are you sure you can’t remember anything?”

Rumi shook her head sadly. “I’m sorry, I just can’t. Between the sunlight and how scared I was, I didn’t see much of him at all.”

“It happened so suddenly, Bon-chan,” Mima intervened. “No one could be expected to remember what he looked like. What we need to

discuss is what we're going to do about him."

"Do you think it's the same man who's been calling you?" her manager asked.

"I'm almost certain of it. The man on the phone said he'd come see me, and the letter talked about having tracked down my phone number."

Tadokoro spread open the crumpled letter and read it again. He'd already read it many times since Mima had brought it to him. Each time he did, he felt even more deeply disturbed than before.

Almost to himself, he muttered, "At first, I dismissed the calls as just the work of some obsessive fan. But now that he's come to the TV station and gotten a letter to you, we can't wave this away as simple harassment." He gave an exasperated shrug.

Sounding less than confident, Rumi offered, "Do you think we should notify the police?"

Tadokoro hummed in serious thought. He wanted to tell the police, but as of this moment, the stalker hadn't committed any crime. He hadn't made a direct threat or caused any harm. The police wouldn't act just because the guy was being unpleasant. And if word of the matter leaked to the public, the entertainment media would make a big joke out of it at Mima's expense. It could harm her image.

"Maybe I'm being selfish here," Tadokoro said, "but from the agency's standpoint, I don't want this to become a police matter. We need to find this man by our own means and set him straight."

Mima understood where he was coming from. Part of her thought she shouldn't let herself be so afraid of some troubling phone calls and a letter. But another part of her thought Tadokoro didn't understand how frightening the stalker was.

"Regardless," Tadokoro said, patting her firmly on the back, "we'll wait and see what he does next. In the meantime, worrying about it won't get us anywhere."

Mima and Rumi looked at each other and sighed. The idol said, "You're right. There's nothing else we can do now but wait and see."

Tadokoro stood and stretched his arms over his head. “Mima, I want you to take a quick break, and then we’ll go over your new song. Forget about that creep and focus on the music.” With a small wave, he rose and left them.

Mima and Rumi stood immediately and followed Tadokoro out. As the three walked down the dim hallway, he muttered to no one in particular, “There’s so many freaks and weirdos these days. Crazed fans, pedophiles… Speaking of which, they never found the guy who killed that girl—the one who cut the skin from her leg. Who the hell goes around cutting off people’s skin, anyway?”

Over his shoulder, Tadokoro tossed Mima a grin. “Mima, be careful not to get your skin cut off.”

For a moment, Mima felt a jolt of pain, as if she could feel the knife in her flesh.

The manager gave her a carefree chuckle and said, “I’m kidding, Mima. It’s just a joke.”

But Mima didn’t laugh. It may have been meant in jest, but it was nasty, all the same. And as little as she appreciated the joke, she hoped it would stay one.

## III

The man’s body shook in big, shoulder-rocking waves. He sensed that some great calamity was going to befall him, though he didn’t know what it was, or when it would come, or what form it would take. An immense and shapeless dread had grown deep within his heart, and it warned him that the thing he held dearest would be brought to ruin.

But what did he hold dearest? He searched inside himself for the answer.

Was it love? Was it dreams? Family?

No, it wasn’t any of those things. Not a chance.

His own life? Now that was something dear. But was it the *dearest*? He wasn't confident that it was. There had to be something more important than that.

Suddenly, in his innermost thoughts, a word formed: purity.

At that moment, convulsions shot through his body. Purity. That which was unsullied, unspoiled. *Yes*, the man's inner voice cried out, *that's it!*

Purity was what he held dearest. Purity was the only thing he could trust in this world of lies.

To protect it, he would willingly give his life.

Kirigoe Mima's presence as a symbol of purity was the reason the man was so inordinately drawn to her.

A long time had passed since idol singers were synonymous with purity. These days, they all sold their sex appeal as a commodity. To the last, those women weren't idols. They were nothing more than prostitutes.

He hated them. He scorned their use of sex. Females were always using their sex to lead men astray. They stripped men of moral integrity and made them into sexual slaves. As far as he was concerned, they were witches who cast misfortune upon the world.

*Except.…* The man's expression brightened. *Kirigoe Mima is different.*

She was pure to the core of her being, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. At least, that's what he believed—and he didn't want to lose her purity. Her purity was his only reason to go on living.

Slowly, he began to see the form of the great calamity he feared. An unease spread within him. What if she were to change into something completely different?

*That would never happen*, he told himself, banishing the thought. But even after he cast the thought away, his mind filled with an indescribable fear.

Tears filling his eyes, he entreated her, *Mima-san, I'm begging you. Please don't change. Please don't change any more than you already have.*

He turned those teary eyes onto the small table in front of him. On the table was the magazine that had been the source of his anxiety. The front cover—a bright, solid red—read: “From Pure to Sexy: Kirigoe Mima to Attempt a Photoshoot!!”

As he stared at the words, he started to believe the only course left for him was to take action.

## IV

Mima didn’t get back to her apartment until two in the morning. She’d been a guest on a late-night radio talk show where she’d mostly discussed her upcoming song. Mima counted the single as her seventh commercial release, though the true number was at least ten, when 12-inch vinyl variant releases were included. In any event, this was to be the seventh song intended for on-air rotation.

Her manager had a lot riding on this song. He wanted nothing less than the top of the charts.

In truth, it was a great song. It had a driving house-music beat and pop essence to spare. An idol singer couldn’t ask for anything more. Still, Mima had trouble believing she would make number one.

Of her past songs, the highest charting had been about a year ago, a 12-inch remix version of “Innocence Forever!” That one might have reached number five. At best, the others had barely squeaked into the top ten.

To aim for number one was a lofty aspiration.

*Bon-chan is getting out of touch*, Mima thought. *A traditional type like me is already behind the times, and idols as a whole don’t have as much pull as they used to. I wish he wouldn’t let his expectations get too high.*

Tadokoro had winked at her and said he had a surefire plan to get her to number one, but she hadn’t understood what he meant. But now she made the connection—she saw what he had in mind. Her new song was slated to release alongside her new photo book. The release of that risqué

volume would get people talking, and the publicity would boost her CD sales.

Mima exhaled a puff of air. If selling CDs were that easy, she wouldn't have to work so hard.

She doubted any photo of her would convey much selling power. No matter how risqué these pictures were, she wasn't about to appear in anything so extreme as to land her in a plastic-wrapped book, or in an urabon—the "books in the back," so named because the illegal nature of their uncensored pornographic images meant their purveyors kept them in back rooms and under the counter.

*I'll be lucky to chart at number nine*, she thought, alongside a sense of guilt for not believing in her manager.

Of course, when the radio host asked her, she'd said, "I'm taking this song all the way to number one. You can *count* on it!"

To tell the truth, though, Mima's manager wasn't the only one who had a lot riding on this release—*she* did, too. One fact was as clear as day: if she kept on following this same course as a traditional idol, her success would slowly and inevitably dwindle. Her more popular peers were all searching for a new trend, taking influences from rock, Eurobeat, and elsewhere. Were Mima alone to remain stagnant, staying her course, she would face an all-too-inevitable outcome.

Certainly, some said that Mima's traditional nature was her appeal. With the broadening and diversifying ideas of what an idol could be, some fans appreciated Mima's unchanging stance.

But those voices formed a minority opinion at best. Mima had long ago accepted that the way she had been—not even wanting to appear in a swimsuit—was going to have to change.

Take that newcomer, Ochiai Eri. From the time Eri made her debut, she had sold her sex appeal farmore than her cuteness. Modern fans were looking for the woman in the idol. Mima could hear Eri's mocking voice: "How long is she going to keep up the innocent girl act?"

If Mima was going to conquer that voice, she would have to become a new person.

As she read the score to her new song, she vowed to herself, *I'm going to change!*

## V

This was not a normal day for Tadokoro. Since the early morning, the manager had been practically frantic, running between every TV and radio station he could, all to promote Mima and her upcoming song. If he didn't, the media would largely ignore an idol with such a demure and subdued image. After all, Mima wasn't going to get in a lover's quarrel or try cutting her wrists or anything like that. Still, this was her only career; she had no side job. For her sake, Tadokoro needed to do the legwork. He needed to maintain relationships with the broadcasters.

The manager believed in Mima's innate talents as an artist, in her potential for success, but her nature was not conducive to self-promotion. As a result, her CD sales thus far hadn't done much to break away from the rest of the idol pack.

Tadokoro had worked as her manager for many years now, and he yearned to give her a number one song. No matter how tough her schedule became, she never uttered a single word in complaint. She was a good kid; she always showed genuine consideration toward her manager and the agency's staff.

If it were in his power, Tadokoro hoped to secure her a spot as the nation's top idol for at least the next several years. As evidenced by the recent telephone harassment, a significant number of her fans were the antisocial type, and Tadokoro had always kept them in mind when he crafted Mima's image.

But maybe he didn't need to do that anymore. Maybe he could be forgiven for betraying those fans, as long as he did it for Mima. At least, that was Tadokoro's read of the situation as he worked out his plan for her new song.

He hadn't told Mima about it yet, but he'd devised an accompanying costume for maximum impact. Despite how she presented herself, Mima

possessed a rather glamorous and even voluptuous figure. As the Charming Rose, Mima had been concealing that sex appeal—but no longer.

Tadokoro was planning to turn her sex appeal up 120 percent.

He'd even thought of a few new taglines for her: "The Neo Sexy," "Naked Heart," "Dainty Diva," and so on, all of them refuting Mima's innocent image.

Just the costume in and of itself was a far cry from that image of purity: a white tank-top blouse lay held in place by two mere suggestions of shoulder straps; the neckline dropped to emphasize the valley between her breasts, and the fabric would do little to restrict any bouncing that might occur when the singer danced. The white wrap-around miniskirt left an edge dangling, enough to tease already titillated TV viewers into wondering if it all might fall away. White knee-high socks—along with a large ribbon on the back of her head and the rear of her skirt—emphasized Mima's cuteness, even while they brought a dissonant, kinky edge to the look.

As Tadokoro looked at the sketch for the costume, he nodded in satisfaction. *If Mima gives this look the okay, her song will take number one for sure.*

## VI

A tense mood hung over the Moon Kids Talent Agency's meeting room, where an all-hands meeting was being held for Kirigoe Mima's new song. Mima herself was in attendance, and her nervousness colored her expression.

Tadokoro distributed copies of the costume sketch. When Mima saw it, she let out a startled laugh.

The husky-voiced manager of the production department spoke first. "Bon-chan, that's pretty extreme, don't you think?"

Tadokoro looked him in the eye and said, "If we're going to change Mima's image, we shouldn't do it by half measures. It would be better to do nothing at all than to make just a minor change."

The head of production had nothing to say against that. He nodded his head in silent agreement.

Tadokoro continued. “Until now, Mima has relied on her innocence. But some day soon, that path will reach a dead end. I’ve been Mima’s manager since her debut. I understand her untapped potential better than anyone.”

He glanced to Mima. “I believe Mima can become a much, much bigger star. This song can take her to that next level. Even the title, ‘Sexy Valley,’ might seem a bit aggressive, but I chose it for that very reason. As you can see, I went all out with the costume, and Mima’s photo book will be released simultaneously with the song, sharing the same title. I’ve already told the TV networks the direction we’re taking Mima in, and I’m counting on everyone here to come on board.”

Tadokoro’s impassioned speech seemed to overpower everyone present. Even Mima felt moved, in a way.

His deep voice resonant, the head of production announced, “I hear what you’re saying, Bon-chan, and I agree with you. But we still need to hear Mima’s opinion.”

The man looked to Mima, who sounded a bit sulky when she said, “If that’s the agency’s decision, I’ll go along with it.”

She was glad to see Tadokoro’s enthusiasm, but she didn’t like the sound of changing who she was to fit into this sensual image. Besides—no matter how extreme a makeover, she doubted anyone would see her as sexy.

On the other hand, a fire burned inside her, a deep desire to triumph over Ochiai Eri.

“If we’re going to do this,” she said, “I’d rather go with a bold plan than one that only goes halfway. It’s time to leave the innocent act behind and be a bombshell.” Mima grinned, and Tadokoro made a happy, victorious fist pump.

“If that’s what Mima says,” Tadakoro said, “then this song is practically a hit already! She just made a tough decision, so I want everyone to put in their best effort and not let her down. We’re getting the *number one* spot—not number two or three.” For emphasis, he wrote a giant number one on the meeting room blackboard. “For Mima’s new image to

succeed, we need to own the top of the charts. We have to let the world know this is no passing phase or fad." The manager looked to a young staffer. "Ken, how do you think Mima's fans will react?"

The man called Ken scrambled to his feet and produced a small stack of survey responses. "Umm, we sent out a survey to members of her fan club and received a largely negative response. However, I want to emphasize that we only asked fan club members, which are primarily her most passionate fans. Still, nearly all of them were against her taking this new, sexier direction. Member number fifteen, a male from Yokohama wrote, 'I want her to stay the Charming Rose forever,' while number thirty, a male from Osaka said, 'Please don't betray us,' and—well, you get the gist of it."

Ken distributed copies of the report to everyone present. Tadokoro gave the report a glance and said, "Of course someone who's already her fan won't want her to change. But we have our own thinking. I believe we can move on without fans like these. If they're so selfish that they'd force Mima to stay a child forever, we don't want them anyway."

Tadokoro looked to Mima. They could see it in each other's faces: both were thinking of the man on the phone. For a second, a chill ran down the idol's spine.

The head of production sniffed in gentle disapproval and said, "Bon-chan, you shouldn't speak so harshly. We need her fans to come with her. We're looking to add to them, not to *replace* them."

"I'm sorry, but I have to disagree," Tadokoro said. "Fans like these aren't fans at all. True fans would want to see the idol grow; they ought to be willing to stomach a little image change if that's what it takes. I refuse to allow any so-called fan to hold her down or drag her back!"

## VII

After the meeting finished, Mima and Rumi went to a convenience store near the singer's apartment. In her casual clothes, Mima could have been any normal woman. No one would guess she was Kirigoe Mima, the idol. If anything, Rumi was more likely to draw attention.

“Tomorrow’s the first day of your photoshoot, isn’t it?” her assistant asked.

“Yeah,” Mima said, picking out a cup of instant soup. “It’s going to be tough—not like the easy shoots I’m used to doing.”

“Please be careful. I’m still worried about that creeper…”

“I will be. But Bon-chan seems to have some plan, and I haven’t gotten one of those horrible calls for a while now.”

Rumi smiled. “I’m happy to hear that.”

The two purchased their cup soups and bread, along with some sanitary items and stockings, and then headed for Mima’s apartment.

The city outside had begun to grow dark, and the faces of the occasional passersby were ill-defined in the dim light. It was the perfect hour for a secret rendezvous.

With a small laugh, Mima said, “This is the most eerie time of day,” and Rumi bobbed her head in agreement.

At that very moment, a man stepped out from the convenience store. He had been watching them shop inside. He started after the two women, as if in pursuit, shoulders hunched over to make his presence less noticeable.

His long hair tumbled across his face, and in the dusky shadows, he appeared as a ghost. The man’s white T-shirt and blue jeans were ubiquitous, but the design on his T-shirt was most unusual, so garishly bright it stood out even in the twilight. The picture was that of an anime character—an adorable little girl, whose face covered his entire back.

Hunched over, the man followed Mima and Rumi.

His hair formed shadows that concealed his face, but his queerly glimmering eyes betrayed a tormented mind. He muttered to himself, the words spoken but unheard.

“I can’t wait any longer. There’s no more time…”

# Chapter 4
# SCHEME

## I

The woman moaned, her long hair bouncing. Her back arched, again and again, unexpectedly sensual creases appearing along the sides of her body. Legs straddling her partner, she gyrated her hips smoothly, moving forcefully, up and down. Playing counterpoint to the woman's moans, an obscene slapping sound rang through the room, like a wet towel smacking against hallway floorboards.

The man moved his hands to the woman's waist, holding her tight while he set the pace, hips pushing up and down. Each time he thrust into her, she let out another cry. Then she was curling forward, body pressed against him, breasts against his abdomen, their touch making him even harder than before.

His fingers tightened around her, and he rolled her to the side, and then under him. Looking down at her face, he felt a deep, warm satisfaction spread through his chest.

*So* this *is what an idol feels like. I can hardly hold back…*

He thrust harder now; the woman's perfect features twisted in pleasure. A hand grasped her breast and played with its softness; the volume of it filled his hand. He began to rub and squeeze, roughly, as if to separate that volume into tiny pieces.

"O-ow," the woman said, wincing. But she seemed to enjoy the pain. She reached her hand to her untouched breast and squeezed it herself.

The man's thrusts picked up more speed, and he felt a warmth building between his legs. He sensed the end was near. Hoping to enjoy himself a little longer, he slowed his movements, but it was too late to hold back the surging force.

He felt her spasming around him, and then the next moment, her flesh contracted, hugging him.

“P-pull out,” she said.

Warm liquid shot through his shaft, and the sticky mass of it spilled out onto her stomach.

The man lay down in the bed. In a half-whisper, he said, “How old are you?”

The woman drew the bedsheets over her chest and curled up beside him. “Don’t worry, silly. I’m plenty old enough—that’s all that matters, right?”

From the nightstand, she took a menthol, lit it, and put it in her mouth.

“The magazines say otherwise, but there’s no *way* that’s true. Not with that body.”

She tossed the bedsheets aside, so that not even a stitch could conceal her from his sight. From her supple skin down to the last proportion, her body was perfect—but the most erotic part of the view was the way the light and shadows fell across her waistline and below. As the man looked at her naked body, he felt his manhood mustering strength for a second battle.

The woman was Ochiai Eri.

She’d only recently made her debut as an idol singer, but she’d already made her first huge hit with her new song, “Rock, Love, Dream!” The performer had quickly attained a spot in the public consciousness as a top idol and enjoyed a high demand on television and for photo shoots.

Her provocative photo book, *Mermaid Trap*, had raised quite the buzz after its summer release. The collection broke photo book sales records. Even the man laying in bed beside her had bought a copy. He’d pleasured himself many times to the picture where she covered her nipples with only her index fingers.

“Even though you’re an idol,” the man said, “being with you like this, I can see you’re as human as the rest of us.”

Enjoying another drag from her cigarette, Eri said, “Being an idol is just business. In my private life, I’m normal as can be.”

The man reached beside the bed where he’d placed his black leather briefcase. He opened it and withdrew a notepad.

The man’s name was Sakuragi Shin—an entertainment reporter.

“So then,” he asked, “when is Kirigoe Mima’s new single coming out?”

“I’d guess the end of next month.”

“That’s not much time,” Shin said, shaking his head. “I might not be able to dig up a scandal on her before then.”

“Don’t worry,” Eri said. “I didn’t come to you without a lead. Have you heard of a rocker called Aran Naoto?”

“Sure I have. He’s a big name.”

“Nobody knows this,” the idol said, “but he and Mima have a thing.”

Sakuragi was speechless. If what Eri was saying were true, it would be a big scoop.

“I know they’re together,” Eri said, “but I don’t have any proof. That’s what I want you to find.”

“So *that’s* what this is about,” Sakuragi said with a wry smile. “You’re sending me to catch them out together, is that it?”

Eri gave him a meaningful grin. “Yes, that’s what I want you to do.”

“You sure don’t pull any punches. You got close to me just so I’d get your rival caught in a scandal.”

“Isn’t that obvious? I’d never sleep with someone like you otherwise.”

“I suppose a mere reporter isn’t quite on the same level as a producer, after all. But if it means I get to have some fun with Ochiai Eri in the flesh, then fine by me.”

Sakuragi, hard again, moved in toward Eri, but the idol slid from the bed and quickly got into her clothes.

“Not so fast,” she said. “If you want me, you’ll have to catch Mima with her secret date!”

## II

*Murano Yuji is a nice guy*, Rumi thought. The photographer was unpretentious in both attitude and appearance, unlike his peers (at least all the ones Rumi had met) who put on grandiose affectations and quirky artist personas—not to mention the many who were unsavory and lecherous.

But Murano Yuji wasn’t like the others. He was kind and incredibly considerate of the people he worked with.

With an affable grin, Yuji declared with mock formality, “Mima-san, your manager has hired me to capture you in pictures both cute and sexy, and that’s what I’m going to do. Think of my voice as the voice of God and obey it absolutely.”

The grin was easy, infectious. Mima bobbed her head and followed along, joking, “Yes, Yuji-san. I’ll do whatever you tell me to.” Upon entering the photo studio, she’d gotten so nervous she thought her heart might stop. But when she met Yuji, her worries settled immediately.

Drinking a cup of coffee Rumi had brought him, the photographer said, “You know, I’ve met you before, Mima-san. It was right after your debut—though I’d be surprised if you remembered.”

Mima’s eyes widened. “Really? Was it for the cover photo?”

“No, we’ve never worked together before now. I went to the Moon Kids office to see Tadokoro-san, and you happened to be there. If I remember right, you were having a planning meeting for your first song.”

“Oh! I remember that day well. That was the first time I’d gone to the office… But I’m afraid I don’t remember you. I’m sorry.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Yuji said. “Back then I had a beard all over my face.”

“Wait? You’re not saying…” She flashed a broad smile of recognition. “*You* were Mister Bear?”

Yuji beamed back at her. With a laugh, he said, “Is that what Tadokoro-san called me? Yes, that was me. Back then, I was just starting out, and I didn’t even have the money to afford a shave.”

“Wow, so that was you!” Mima said, happily shaking his hand. “What a time that was. It’s nice to remember.”

Reassured, Mima thought, *With him behind the camera, I don’t have to be worried.*

Mima left the photo studio with a bounce in her step. The shoot had proceeded at an incredibly vigorous pace, but the hard work had been accompanied by a commensurate sense of fulfillment.

Not only had the pace been tough, but once Yuji began taking pictures, the gentle man transformed into a completely different person. Through his camera he pursued his subject with machinelike coolness. Mima hadn’t minded, though. His cold manner made her feel that she was in the capable hands of a professional.

When Mima walked down the staircase and exited the studio, darkness had already fallen. Rumi was waiting for her outside the entrance; when Mima saw her, the idol gave a broad wave. Then she noticed her assistant had already summoned a taxi, whose open door accepted them both.

“How was the photoshoot?” Rumi asked.

Mima hummed in thought, then said, “It was tough, but satisfying.”

“Yuji is a really nice guy, isn’t he?”

“He really is,” Mima agreed. “I’m not sure I could have made it through the day if not for him. I might have gone running for the hills.” She dropped her gaze.

Rumi understood how Mima felt. This wasn’t just a simple change to her image, this was a sudden leap from innocence personified to being photographed in the semi-nude. No matter how resilient she was, the change must have been mentally and emotionally exhausting.

Mima said, “It really *was* satisfying; I wasn’t just saying that. I found myself thinking, I actually am pretty sexy. At a certain point, I wasn’t doing

the photo shoot just to do it—I truly wanted to make the best pictures I could."

"I hope I'm not out of line saying this," Rumi offered, "but I find that your brand of sexiness is refined and still has a certain innocence to it. It's far superior to Ochiai Eri's straight up vulgarity."

Rumi's voice took on a sharp edge when she mentioned Eri. Apparently, she shared Mima's hatred for the young upstart—a sentiment Mima noticed. The singer grinned and said, "It sounds like you don't care for Eri, either."

Rumi puffed out her cheeks. "She's no idol. She's a nobody. She doesn't even give you a hello when you run into her in the studios. And… and, she's a slut—I can just tell!"

Mima let out a little gasp. "Rumi-chan. You shouldn't say such terrible things." She gestured to the driver with her eyes.

Rumi got the message. To Mima, she impishly stuck out her tongue—and then, for the driver's benefit, apologized with a straightforward "Sorry."

The taxi reached its destination, and the rear passenger door swung open as Mima stepped out. She leaned back in and said, "Meet me here at ten a.m. tomorrow," and then headed up to her apartment. Rumi waved goodbye from inside the taxi.

Mima took the elevator to the third floor and walked toward her room, down a long hallway that was open to the exterior on one side. Her apartment was number 304, a southern-facing corner unit. Her name, of course, was not displayed on the placard.

Mima dug her key from her purse and put it in the lock. Just then, she heard a rustling under her feet. Curious, she looked down and saw a red object. *What's that?* she thought, stooping down to pick it up.

It was a red rose.

Something about the rose felt alarming, sinister. Attached to the stem like a little branch was a rolled-up piece of white paper. Hurriedly, she

removed the page. Something was written on it. She read it in the hallway's light.

The blood drained from her face.

On the outside of the folded sheet of paper was written "Your Darling Rose."

He'd come.

He'd really come.

This man who she feared more than anyone else had come to her home.

Her hands shaking, she opened the letter and saw the now-familiar unsteady handwriting.

*This might be my final request.*

*Why? Because you haven't been listening to a word I've been telling you.*

*I delivered my previous letter to you (well, strictly speaking, to your assistant). I can be fairly confident you read it.*

*I've called you many times.*

*I went to all these great efforts to tell you one, simple message: Please do not change.*

*And yet, look at you! From your costume to your new song, to the soon-to-be-released photo book, you're becoming a Mima completely different from the Mima you've always been.*

*But fine. I won't ask you again.*

*It appears it is now time for me to act. I will save you from this wicked path by my own means.*

*Like I said—I won't ask you again.*

*I've made up my mind.*

*I will take action.*

*Sincerely,*
*Your Darling Rose*

When Mima finished reading the letter, she sank to the floor on the spot.

## III

In Mima's apartment, Tadokoro exploded with rage. "I'll never forgive that bastard!" he shouted. "Who does he think he is, threatening Mima like a goddamned coward? If he had any balls, he'd come out and show himself!"

Mima lightly shook her head. The shock of receiving the letter had kept her awake almost the entire night, so physically, she wasn't doing well—but emotionally, she'd calmed down for the most part.

Seated beside Mima on the sofa, Rumi watched Tadokoro with an anxious expression. The assistant said, "This isn't the time for anger, Tadokoro-san," she said. "This has gone too far now. We need to inform the police. We're beyond worrying about Mima's image if it goes public. That freak came to here--to her *home*."

Rumi's eyes were serious.

Tadokoro nodded deeply in agreement. "I understand. You're right, Rumi. This is no joke. This is a full-on crime. I'm friendly with a few detectives, and I can notify them today. They'll grab this pervert by his neck and haul him in."

Tadokoro couldn't forgive anyone who would cause such a good girl to suffer. He had managed many performers, and Mima wasn't his first idol. All of them had been selfish and petty. None of them had treated him as their manager.

But Kirigoe Mima was different.

She was dutiful and treated both Tadokoro and the rest of the agency's staff with consideration—and she possessed incredible

perseverance. To Mima, Tadokoro said, “Just you see. Against the full might of the police, that creep doesn’t stand a chance. They’ll catch him, and for good. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Mima put her hand to her face and smiled weakly. “Thank you, Bon-chan. I’m glad that you feel that way…but don’t tell the police.”

Rumi turned to Mima in shock and said, “What are you saying? Look at how much distress he’s caused you.”

“She’s right, Mima,” Tadokoro said. “This is no time to worry about the agency. This is about you now—as a person.”

Mima looked down, shrinking into her shoulders. “I understand how you both feel—believe me, I do. You want the police to protect me. But think about it: What are this guy’s crimes? Making prank phone calls and delivering weird letters—and that’s it. I don’t think that’s enough to move the police into action. Even the letters’ contents—while they’re very frightening to me—it wouldn’t be impossible to read them as being mere fan letters, if that’s what someone wanted to see in them. Besides, I don’t want to have to go through being interviewed by the police. My new song comes out next month. Starting tomorrow, my schedule will be consumed by promoting it on TV. I don’t have the time to waste on some creep.”

Her speech genuinely moved Tadokoro. *She’s so resilient*, he thought. A normal idol in this situation would have been hysterical, probably lashing out at her assistant and manager. But instead, Mima was thinking of Rumi and Tadokoro.

Rumi also appeared to have been moved, as she looked at Mima through teary eyes.

Tadokoro patted his fist to his chest and said, “All right, Mima—this is what we’ll do. I won’t contact the police. We’ll stick to your TV schedule as planned. But I’ll stay at your side the whole time. Of course, that includes me staying here in your apartment for a while.” He looked to Rumi. “I’d like you to be here as much as you can. After all, an idol and her manager entering and leaving her apartment with no other company? Who *knows* what people would say.”

“Okay!” Rumi said enthusiastically.

To Mima, Tadokoro said, “Everything will be fine. I may not look it now, but as a student I made first dan in judo. Black belt. If that creep comes anywhere near you, I’ll knock him out with my trademark ura-nage back throw.”

“Thank you,” Mima said, as tears finally filled her eyes.

## IV

Hardly stirring a muscle, the man stared at the knife on his desk. The weapon’s blade gleamed in lamplight. The longer he gazed into its sheen, the more the man felt his calm return. A soft, warm comfort enveloped his body.

Maybe it was the same feeling as a mother’s warmth. Or maybe it was that elusive emotion—love—which he had never once tasted.

He took the knife in hand and rubbed the handle with his fingertips. The grip was made of wood, and he bobbed his head as he enjoyed the sensation of its rough texture against his skin.

Something had been carved into the handle—a human figure. The man rubbed insistently at that figure. When he eventually stopped, he brought the carving up to his eyes for a closer look.

The figure was a woman, a full-body carving.

The man spoke to it. “Mima-san,” he said, and the woman smiled back at him. At least, that’s what it seemed like.

He had spent many dogged months carving the figure into the handle. He copied her likeness from several photos of Mima from the time of her debut and put great care into the details. Both the face and the overall proportions were nearly identical to the real thing.

“Mima-san,” he said, “you really were great back then. Of course, you still are—to an extent. But…” He poked his finger at the carving’s face. “But you can’t keep going on like this—like you’ve been doing lately. How many times have I asked you to stay how you were? Why don’t you *listen* to me?”

He gripped the knife by the handle and tightened his lips. “I’ve decided. My mind won’t be changed. It feels like I’ve been thinking about what to do for years. Now’s the time to do it.”

The man pulled a record from the shelves. It was Kirigoe Mima’s debut single, “Innocence Forever!” The song was his favorite, so much so that when the 12-inch remix version came out, he bought two copies.

“You were still pure back then. I thought you would remain innocent your whole life. I thought you would never betray me.” A savage cast came over his eyes. “But maybe I was wrong. That’s why I’m going to take action. I’ve thought about this for ages, but now it’s time to act.”

Still holding the knife, the man stood. He walked across his room into an adjoining wood-floored kitchen. Even there, the piles of video tapes and idol magazines intruded.

From the freezer of a mini fridge next to his sink, he retrieved a blackened object bundled in cling wrap. He placed it on the countertop with a *thunk*. For a moment, he studied the bundle, then left it on the counter and returned to his room, muttering, “Probably best to let it thaw naturally.”

Seated at his desk, he resumed gazing at the front jacket of “Innocence Forever!” From the cover, Mima looked back at him, her hair short, her eyes big and round, her clothing cute and frilly. Her smile was as innocent as a baby’s.

As he looked at the picture, his eyes began to water.

*I have to protect this smile,* he thought. *That’s why I need to act.*

He bit down on his lip.

The wrapped object gradually softened and turned spongier, and an unpleasant smell began to permeate the kitchen. The grinning man peeled apart the plastic wrap, thinking, *I figured it might stink a bit*. When the wrap opened, the stench immediately intensified.

The object within appeared to be a thin strip of flesh. The top side was yellowish, the underside an unnatural black.

*I shouldn’t have waited so long before attempting my experiment*, he thought, but it was too late to change anything. He grasped the fetid thing

between his fingers and placed it on a bath towel. Grim determination replaced his smile.

He held the knife in his right hand and pressed the blade's tip into his forearm.

He ran the blade up his arm. Red streaks of blood coursed across his skin.

The man grunted. Sharp jolts of pain tore through his brain.

But this was for Kirigoe Mima. For her, he bore the pain. The knife did not relent. When it had nearly reached the crook of his elbow, he pulled away the edge. But he adjusted his grip and cut again—first across his arm, then back down toward his wrist.

By the end, he'd made the bloody outline of a perfect rectangle.

The man slid the knife beneath the wound. He began to separate his skin from the layer of fatty tissue beneath. Sticky globs of blood oozed out from the open cut. The pain began to dull; heat surged through the whole of his arm.

A distant part of him thought that, at least where the cutting was concerned, the sensation felt similar to peeling the skin from a raw piece of chicken. As he severed the connections between skin and meat, his flesh began to lift away.

Occasional jolts of intense pain tore through his body. He wondered if that signified nerve damage.

In his mind he repeated, *This is for Mima, this is for Mima*, like an incantation.

At the end of this minutes-long struggle, he finally peeled off the patch of skin.

Patchy spurts of blood leaked from white fat and red flesh, both equally exposed. Droplets fell from his arm, absorbed into the towel, but less blood came out than the man had expected.

He took the thawed-out, putrid scrap of flesh and pressed it onto the flayed-open wound upon his arm. It felt unpleasantly slippery to the touch, but that sensation was immediately dwarfed by biting, stinging pain. He

wrapped a white cloth around his arm, the better to keep the thawed flesh from separating from his own.

## V

Blushing, Rumi came back to Mima's green room.

"How was it?" Mima asked. Standing in front of a full-length floor mirror, the idol applied her makeup.

"Well, it's a tough song," Rumi said. "That part in the chorus, where the line goes 'Oh, run away with me,' has a tricky interval. If you're not careful, it'll want to go flat."

Not pausing the makeup, Mima replied, "You're right. I'll have to be careful there."

Mima always left the soundchecks to Rumi, since the pair had almost the same vocal range and ability to project.

This was the first time Mima would perform her new single, "Sexy Valley." Mima didn't typically fret this much over a soundcheck, but she was especially nervous today, as was Rumi.

"It's got a catchy beat, though," Rumi added. "It just makes you want to dance." She started humming the rhythm. Mima moved her arms to the music and gradually her anxiety melted away.

"Thank you," the idol said. "I feel a lot better now. I'm going to nail this song today. I can feel it."

Standing half hidden behind an open door in the corner of the TV studio sound stage, Mima waited for her cue.

Whenever she was on standby, she liked to wait wherever she was unlikely to be seen. Her poor eyesight—probably worse than 20/200 in both eyes—meant that she didn't always recognize people she knew, even if they walked right past her. That was all the more true in the typically dim light backstage. She preferred to minimize the risk of awkward situations before a performance.

*Music Town* was about to start. The show, a live broadcast, permitted no mistakes—especially when Mima's performance topped the episode. Live performances were hardly new to the singer—yet her heart raced, and her body felt numb. *You've got this*, she told herself.

Then an intense feeling of being watched overcame her. Reflexively, she looked over her shoulder.

It was Ochiai Eri, wearing an outrageously gaudy costume. Feathers crowned her head like a cockscomb. Even larger feathers extended from her back and a tight-fitting lamé mini dress completed the cabaret dancer look. She resembled a peacock, but on Ochiai Eri the lewd ensemble completely worked.

The idols' eyes met.

Eri scoffed and turned her head away, then spoke just loud enough to be heard. "Just how old is she supposed to be, anyway? First she put on that innocent act, and now she's in that smutty getup? I hope I never age. Apparently when a woman gets too old she can't pull off innocent *or* sleazy."

Mima locked eyes with her rival and grinned, as if to say, *Is that all you got?*

For a moment, Eri's bravado wilted, but she quickly recovered. Under her breath, the rival singer muttered, "Just you wait."

## VI

Tadokoro sat on the couch in Mima's apartment, drinking a glass of wine.

He expected Mima and Rumi to arrive soon. *Music Town* finished at around 8:50. From the K-TV studio, Mima's apartment was about thirty minutes by taxi. Tadokoro glanced at the clock on a table in the corner of the room. It read a quarter past nine.

Wine glass in hand, Tadokoro got up and walked to the window. He opened the curtains and looked outside. He'd been repeating this process about once every ten minutes, not because he was nervous about when

Mima would return, but because he was watching the apartment's front entrance for any lurking strangers. He'd been paying particular attention to the bushes beside the entrance.

The manager had remained stationed in Mima's apartment since a little after seven in the evening, and no such stranger had come loitering. The second anyone even the slightest bit suspicious showed up, Tadokoro was prepared to run out and capture him.

Just as he was about to close the curtains, a slash of light fell upon the bushes, likely from the headlights of a passing car. Moments later, a midsize taxi came around the front and stopped beside the entryway. Mima and Rumi stepped out.

Tadokoro closed the curtain and sank into the sofa to await them. A short three minutes later, he heard their voices outside the door, followed by the sound of the key sliding into the lock. The door opened, and Mima and Rumi rushed in, their expressions elated.

"I'm home!" Mima said in as cheerful a voice as he'd ever heard.

Tadokoro met her and put his arm around her shoulder. "You did great, Mima! Absolutely fabulous!"

With a ticklish scrunching of her shoulders, the singer made a victory sign with her fingers and said, "It *was* great, wasn't it? I've never performed a song so satisfying as that one."

"And that was one *sexy* costume," Tadokoro said. "It even got *my* heart beating a little faster."

"They had the cameras at a pretty low angle, didn't they?" Mima said. "I felt a little conscious of them at the start, but I got used to it pretty fast." She gave a satisfied chuckle.

Rumi was busy pouring hot water into a drip coffee setup. She said, "You're cute no matter what you're wearing. I don't know how you did it, but you made even that sexy costume cute, too."

Mima looked happy enough that she could fly away. "I think this song is going to make it, Bon-chan," she said. "Singing's seriously never felt so amazing!"

Tadokoro thought he understood what she was feeling. She'd kept herself bottled up in her idea of what an idol was, but now this song had set her spirit free. Making the change hadn't been easy, but he was profoundly glad he had challenged Mima to expand herself.

"All right!" Tadokoro said. "Tonight, we're going to celebrate the beginning of Mima's new journey. Rumi-chan, bring out the beer."

Rumi opened the refrigerator and shook her head. "Sorry. Looks like we're all out."

Mima stood. "Let's go buy some more, then."

Tadokoro held out his palm to stop them. "Wait, wait," he insisted. "I'll go. You two sit down." He extracted himself from the couch. "I'll be right back. I'm pretty sure I remember seeing a vending machine around the back."

Several half-liter beer cans in hand, Tadokoro stepped into the elevator. He took it to the third floor, then jogged down the walkway to Mima's apartment. Just as he reached for the doorknob, his eyes happened to glance toward the fire escape.

It was difficult to make out, but there, in a void of shadow untouched by the nighttime lights, something was stirring. Tadokoro placed the beer cans quietly on the floor in front of Mima's apartment and tiptoed toward the exit.

Someone there, whoever they were, was watching.

Keeping his voice down, Tadokoro asked, "Who's there?"

The figure in the shadows moved, responding to his voice. Tadokoro broke into a run.

"Damn it!" he heard the dark shape mutter, and then it fled down the fire escape.

The manager gave pursuit. "Stop!" he shouted, running down the twisting steps. He came out below the apartment building's rear exit, near the tenants' small covered parking lot.

Tadokoro looked from left to right and saw a long-haired man fleeing from the garage.

*It's that damn pervert!*

Tadokoro sprinted after the man as fast as he could. Before long, his heart was pumping so hard it felt like it might leap from his throat—but Tadokoro refused to slow his chase.

The fleeing man turned onto an unlit street—this neighborhood was well removed from any shopping districts, and most of the roads lacked street lamps. On top of that, the man wore a black shirt and jeans that melded into the shadows; Tadokoro nearly lost sight of him several times.

*I can't let him go,* Tadokoro thought. *Not him.* His tenacious resolve wouldn't allow him to lose sight of the man. The high school judo fighter wasn't a fast runner—but he still had stamina.

After several minutes, the distance between them began to close. The fleeing intruder was wearing out first. On a riverside gravel path, Tadokoro managed to grab the man by the back of the neck. He got a good grip and yanked him back inwards, down to the ground. The manager pressed his elbow against the base of the man's neck, while his other hand restrained his enemy's left arm.

"Who are you?" Tadokoro demanded. "What were you doing outside that apartment?"

The man grunted in pain, but he glared up at his captor with stubborn intensity.

*So, he still thinks he can defy me?* Tadokoro thought.

The manager felt disgust stir in the pit of his stomach. He put more force behind his elbow. "I'll ask you one more time," he said. "Who are you?"

The man twisted his lips, his expression radiating hatred. He didn't say a word.

Then, despite Tadokoro restraining him, he used his free legs to strike back, kicking at Tadokoro's shoulder with the top of his right foot.

Caught off guard, Tadokoro stumbled off the man, who quickly broke free and immediately launched a punch.

Tadokoro tried to dodge the strike—too slow. The man's fist glanced off his cheekbone.

Without hesitating, the stranger threw a second punch.

This time, Tadokoro was ready for him. He read the man's attack instinctively, bent his arm into a V, and drove his elbow into the back of the man's neck. He put all his weight into his arm, slamming both his opponent and himself to the ground.

It was Tadokoro's trademark back throw.

The wind was knocked from the intruder's lungs, escaping in an unnatural-sounding grunt. The man stopped moving.

## VII

Sounding worried, Mima muttered, "What's taking Bon-chan so long? How far did he go to find some beer?"

Rumi, busy slicing cheese, stopped her work to glance over at Mima. She asked, "Would you like me to go look for him?"

"Maybe. Well, no. I shouldn't be worried like this." Mima put on a confident smile. "He can handle himself… In any case, let's give him a little longer. If he's not back in five minutes, we'll go find him together."

Rumi brought a serving tray piled high with sliced salami and cheese to the living room table and set the wine glasses next to the tray. As much for her own benefit as Mima's, she suggested, "Maybe the vending machine out back ran out."

The door opened.

When Mima saw Tadokoro standing in the doorway with blood flowing from his cheek, she reflexively shouted, "Bon-chan!" Then quieter, her voice strained with worry, she asked, "What happened to you? You're bleeding."

Rather than answer, Tadokoro stepped to the side and presented a dirty, long-haired heap of a man beside the doorway.

Her eyes wide open, Mima looked to Tadokoro's face and asked, "Who is that?"

"This is *him*. That pervert. I found him watching your apartment. But everything is all right now. I caught him." Tadokoro laughed heartily.

Mima looked to the man who was collapsed in her entryway. His hair and clothing were meant to look youthful, but he was far from young—maybe even thirty-five. She felt angry, disgusted even, thinking of this old letch calling her again and again, writing her those nasty letters.

"It's not him," Rumi said, now standing beside Mima.

Mima asked, "What?"

Tadokoro asked, "What did you say?"

Looking troubled, Rumi lowered her head and said, "I don't think it's him…"

Tadokoro's face became serious. "Are you telling me that this isn't the stalker?"

"I'm don't remember what happened very clearly, but I think the man who handed me the letter in the TV station was younger than this. And…"

"And what?" Tadokoro pressed.

"I think he was smaller, too."

Hearing this, Tadokoro grabbed the long-haired man by the shoulders and squeezed. "I'm going to ask you one more time. Who are you?"

Seemingly irritated, the man brushed off Tadokoro's hands. He said, "Would you shut up already? How many times are you going to *ask* that?" With hate in his face, the man glared up at Tadokoro. "All you need to know is I'm no pervert stalker. I was there for my job."

"Your job?" Tadokoro scoffed. "What do you mean, your job? Your job is to lurk outside someone's apartment door?"

"Yes," the man spat, "that's my job." Then he clammed up.

Mima strode up to the man confidently. "Listen here, you. You think there's a job out there that pays money for spying on a single woman's apartment? Are you nuts?"

“Stuff it,” the man said. “There *is* a job like that. I’m a reporter. Maybe you’ve heard of them? Specifically, I’m an entertainment reporter.”

At once, Mima, Rumi, and Tadokoro all said, “A reporter?”

The three exchanged glances.

Then, sounding fed up, Tadokoro said, “Wait just a moment. I’ve been earning my living in this business for twenty years now. I know every entertainment reporter big and small, but I’ve never seen your face.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re out of touch. All right, maybe I don’t look it, but I’m an exclusive reporter for the *Weekly Thriller*. My name is Sakuragi Shin. You want my card?”

Tadokoro snorted. “The *Weekly Thriller*, huh?” The manager pictured the magazine’s garish cover. It was a tasteless, third-rate rag. “If that’s true, then what’s a tabloid reporter doing here?”

The man grinned. “I can’t tell you that. It’s what you call a trade secret, *got* it?”

Tadokoro scowled. “Just who do you think you are, you bastard?! You can’t talk to me like that. Trade secret? Don’t make me laugh. If that’s how you want to play it, I’ll turn you over to the police and have you arrested for trespassing in a private residence. Or how about I give you another taste of my judo, first?”

A second later, Tadokoro had the man hoisted up across his back.

Arms and legs flailing uselessly in the air, the man said, “A-all right. I’ll talk. I’ll talk! Just let me down.”

“Fine,” Tadokoro said, releasing him.

Realizing that he wouldn’t be getting that second round with Ochiai Eri, the man reluctantly explained then what he had been sent to do.

Rumi’s lips trembled as she said, “How low can that woman *get*?”

Tadokoro said, “I’ll never forgive her.” His rage had reached its peak.

Mima said nothing, instead biting at her lip.

Sulking, the man said, “I’m telling you, I’m just the hired hand. All I was supposed to do was catch Kirigoe Mima and Aran Naoto on a date.”

The manager said, “I don’t know what Eri told you, but our Mima has never even *met* that guy.” His voice raised into a booming shout. “So you listen good—if I find out that you’ve been spreading any false rumors, you can be *sure* you’ll be hearing from me!”

Meanwhile, Mima’s thoughts fixed on Aran Naoto, who she had gone on several dates with two years earlier.

# Chapter 5
# DETERMINATION

## I

The day was busy from the start.

Mima made three TV appearances in just the morning alone. Added to a spate of magazine interviews and other obligations, even her assistant Rumi had trouble keeping track of the full schedule. But no matter how frantic the day got, Mima did it all without a single complaint.

Only after she'd finished her guest role on an afternoon variety program did Mima and Rumi finally have time for lunch. The pair went into a small café adjacent to the Aozora TV studio. The lunch crowds had mostly cleared out. No one recognized the singer.

Rumi ordered a salad, and Mima went back and forth on a few items before deciding on the pilaf.

With a displeased twitch of her nose, Rumi said, "I still can't get over what she tried to do to you."

"She's always hated me," Mima said, "but the feeling is mutual."

"Do you remember that magazine interview where she said she thought of you as her rival? Even back then, she sounded so full of herself."

"She's ambitious."

Rumi's frown brought creases between her eyebrows. "It's not a matter of being ambitious. She's delusional. You know what I think? I think she's not right in the head."

Without meaning to, Mima let out a sigh. "Rumi-chan, you shouldn't talk like that. Badmouthing her won't help anything."

"I mean it. She's crazy," Rumi said, twirling her fork in the air for emphasis. "Look at how she used that reporter to try to drag you down. I

wouldn’t put it past her to…” Rumi lowered her voice. “To be behind those calls and letters.”

Mima gently waved her hand, dismissive. “I don’t think so. I almost wish she’d put that man up to it—I’d feel safer, at least—but no, I don’t think he has anything to do with her.”

“I’m not so sure,” Rumi said, lips pouted. “I don’t mean to speak out of place, but you don’t know what that Eri is capable of doing. She even came up with that nonsense about you and Aran Naoto.”

Mima lowered her head and kept it that way for a while. Rumi watched her with concern, then asked, “What’s wrong, Mima-san?”

Mima snapped her head up. “Okay. I feel like I can tell you this.” The singer downed the water in her cup with a single gulp, then said, “She didn’t make up that story about Naoto.”

Rumi’s eyes went wide as she exclaimed, “What?”

“We dated, but it was just for a little while, and it was more than two years ago. I was serious about the relationship, but I could tell he wasn’t, so I broke it off.” Mima stared off into the distance. “He’s nothing more than a happy memory now.”

“But… but…” Rumi looked right at her. “You’re not dating him now, right? Eri is trying to make it sound like you’re still a thing. How low can she go? And you know what? Even if—*if*—you were still dating him, that’s your own business. Anyone who’d go tattling to some sleazy reporter doesn’t deserve to be an idol!”

## II

Entering the K-TV studio building, Mima passed the open door to the makeup room and saw Ochiai Eri inside, standing before a full-length mirror. Her self-proclaimed rival was talking with the director of *Sunday Studio*, but Mima couldn’t make out their conversation save for the man’s occasional booming laughter.

Keeping her expression casual, Mima entered the room.

The director noticed her. “Hiya, Mima-chan.”

Mima offered the pair a slight bow, which Eri returned.

Mima approached Eri and asked, “Do you have a moment?”

The younger idol responded with a nod that said she knew full well what this was about.

The two women made their way to a small, plainly-decorated café inside the K-TV building, where Mima got straight to the point.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mima demanded.

Eri’s lips formed a knowing smirk. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You can feel however you like about me,” Mima said, brushing aside a stray lock of hair with a casual flick of her hand, “but I’d like you to stop these cowardly attempts at sabotaging my career.”

Eri laughed through her nose and replied, “Mima-san, I respect you. That’s why I chose you as my rival. I even said as much in that interview. Surely I would never try to sabotage someone who I admire.”

Mima returned the laugh. “Eri-chan, let’s drop the pretenses just for today, shall we? I want us to both say what we mean. Now, you know a man called Sakuragi Shin, don’t you?”

“I’ve met him,” Eri replied. “He’s a reporter for a third-rate magazine. He did an article on me.”

“And that’s all?”

“Of course that’s all. Are you suggesting there’s something more?”

Anger colored Eri’s expression, but Mima’s stare remained unflinching.

Mima said, “This Sakuragi was watching my apartment. My manager caught him and loosened his lips. Do I have to say more?”

“It sounds like you’re suggesting that I sent Sakuragi to your apartment.” Eri rose from her chair and let out a deep laugh. “Mima-san, you really are getting old and out of touch. I’ll tell you how the world works. It’s a reporter’s job to dig through famous people’s private lives. *I* don’t tell him where to go—he goes wherever he decides. I never put that Sakuragi up to anything.”

Mima slapped her hands on the table and stood from her chair as well. “I see how it is. Well, I know what you are. I won’t ‘suggest’ that you seduced that reporter into doing your bidding. But I’ve got one thing to say to you. You keep saying I put on an innocent girl act. But I believe that an idol has to have some real innocence in her. If that comes across as an act, or as being out of touch, then so be it.”

Mima looked Eri right in the eye and continued. “I’ll make this as clear as I can. Eri-chan, you can make yourself as sexy as you want. But sexy and promiscuous aren’t the same thing. Idols who are loose with men always end up hated by their fans. The core of an idol’s pride is the innocence deep within her heart. You’d do best to remember that.”

Eri doused Mima with the water in her cup. She shouted, “I don’t care what you think!” and ran from the café.

When Ochiai Eri got to her green room, she immediately took out her cell phone. She called a number twice without getting an answer, but her third connected.

“Hello, Naoto?” Eri said, irritation edging into her voice. “Are you free tonight?”

Aran Naoto spoke with the hoarse voice of someone who had just woken up. “Is this Eri? Why are you calling me so early?”

“Come on, I can call you whenever. So, are you free tonight?”

“I need a little more notice than that,” Naoto said. “How about another day?”

“If that’s how you’re going to be, then fine. I don’t need to see you again, anyway!”

“Hey, hey, wait a minute.” Naoto sighed. “You always have to have it your way, don’t you?”

Eri said, “So you *are* free tonight. Roppongi. 10 p.m. You know the place. Don’t be late.”

Naoto clicked his tongue. “You’re not giving me much choice.”

Eri hung up, cutting off any further protest. Her lips formed a tight smile as she thought to herself, *I'll show that poseur. We'll see what she has to say for herself then.*

She looked at her own face in the green room's mirror, affording herself a deep nod.

## III

The man carefully began unwrapping the cloth from his arm. Sharp pain flashed across the limb, and the pungent stench of rotten flesh filled the air. Clinging to the cloth were splotches of blackened blood and dried out flakes of skin.

The man closely inspected his bared forearm, the middle of which had turned a blackish red. The area stung with a prickling, itchy pain.

The man probed the painful patch with his fingernail. With each little scratch, the discolored flesh flaked away and scattered. The layer beneath was sticky and wet. He gave the area a wipe with the scrap of cloth and intense pain spread through his entire arm.

The man narrowed his already small eyes and felt grief.

"A failure, after all," he muttered under his breath, gazing upon that festering patch. "I might need to revise my plans."

He impatiently rubbed at the discolored skin with all five fingers of his other hand. The flakes of dried skin mixed with the wet, sticky layer below to form gelatinous globs, which he wiped away with the cloth.

But even after the arm had been scrubbed clean, dots of a clear, oozy fluid reemerged from the wound. He pressed one with a firm finger, and yellowish pus spurted out.

The man's eyes remained fixed on his sickly-colored forearm as he fought to bottle up the rage building in the pit of his stomach.

"Why? Why wouldn't it take?" he shouted.

He threw the blood and pus-covered rag to the floor. "I went through so much effort to take that skin. I worked so hard for it—for Mima's sake!

Why? Why wouldn’t it stay on?”

He pounded a fist against his desk. He put his hands over his head and dropped to the floor, convulsing.

*The skin must stay on. The skin must stay on. The skin must stay on.…*

He lifted his head.

Before him was a poster of Kirigoe Mima. Innocently smiling, she gazed at him. She spoke inside him. *If you really care about me, don’t give up. Keep trying—just a little bit longer.*

He felt like something had struck him on the head.

“That’s right, that’s right,” he said. He sat up in the middle of the small room. “This is for Mima’s sake. I can’t give up so easily.”

His face went red with self-reproachful embarrassment, and he slapped himself on the cheeks.

“Just because the skin didn’t stay on doesn’t mean I can let myself become discouraged. Positive thinking—that’s what I need.”

He grinned at the Mima on the poster.

“It was probably just a problem of materials. Even though I kept the skin in a freezer, it was still a month old. Plus, the girl was very young. Maybe there was some kind of cellular mismatch due to the difference in age.”

The man’s grin widened. “What good does worrying do when you can take action instead? Isn’t that right, Mima? I’m going to give it another try. I swear I am. Next time, I’ll experiment with a woman close to your age. And if I can, I probably should use another idol’s skin—don’t you think?”

The man caressed the poster-Mima’s face. “I’m all right now. Look, I’m not depressed at all.” To prove his point, he spun around once, an exaggerated, goofy display.

“Now, which idol will be my test subject?”

The man’s expression changed to that of a beast seeking its prey.

A single video cassette lay upon the desk. On its cardboard sleeve, written in a wriggling, worm-like scrawl were the words: FOR SELF-

PLEASURE: IDOLS VOL. 3. The man removed the tape from its sleeve and carefully set it in his VCR.

He pressed the play button, and various idols—all in flashy costumes—began appearing on the screen. First was Izumi Haruna, then Kawano Keiko, and then Peach Pie, and so on. As was apparent from the tape's title, the recordings featured were ones the man used when he fondled himself.

Never had he done so to images of Kirigoe Mima. Not once—not even to a fantasy of her. He didn't want to stain her purity. He used other idols to handle his base desires.

Now he watched the tape not for pleasure, but in the hope of finding a suitable test subject.

One after another, pretty idols appeared on the cathode ray tube, but the man began to doubt this approach. Yes, he had pleasured himself to the sight of them, but their cuteness and innocence still stirred his emotions. Even in service to Mima, he couldn't bear to take any of these spirited girls as a test subject—especially not when he intended to perform his next attempt on nearly the same scale as his final plan. He would not be merely removing a tiny patch of skin from her thigh, as he had with the little girl.

The man pressed the fast-forward button impatiently. Was there no idol he could use for his test without prickling his conscience?

As the tape approached its end, the recordings became more recent and featured newer idols.

The man's finger lifted from the fast-forward button.

On the screen was an idol in a leotard—a leotard with quite high-cut legs at that, clinging to every curve and fold.

"Ochiai Eri," the man whispered.

A dull feeling of pleasure came to life in his groin. He lowered his zipper and pulled himself out, taking himself gently in his right hand. He began stroking rhythmically.

On the TV screen, Eri grinded her exposed hips. For just a moment, the fabric of her leotard pulled up tighter between her legs.

The man let out a short grunt, and a thick, sticky mess spilled out into his hand. He touched his hand to Eri's face and shouted, overcome by deep

emotion, “You whore! You seducer of men. You’re no idol. You’re nothing! You bring nothing but grief to your innocent fans. That’s it. I’ve decided. I’m taking you as my test subject. Just you wait!”

## IV

Excitement lifted Rumi’s voice nearly to a squeal. “This is incredible! It’s fantastic!”

Rumi, Mima, Tadokoro, and Murano Yuji were all seated on the sofa in the Moon Kids Agency’s reception area. On the table before them was a freshly printed copy of Mima’s photo album, *Sexy Valley*.

Clapping his hands, Tadokoro said, “It came out even better than I had hoped.”

Indeed, after flipping through the pages, Mima felt more confident in the photos than she might have expected.

To Mima, Tadokoro said, “You’re satisfied, aren’t you? I can tell.”

The singer nodded and smiled. “Y-yes. I like it.”

“It’s great,” Rumi said. “I just know it. It’s got that shock value, but it’s not obscene. Mima’s charm and Murano’s talent with a camera delivered a win for sure.” Rumi glanced to the photographer, then quickly looked away, her cheeks flushing a little.

With an embarrassed twitch of the nose, Yuji said, “I’m flattered, but for this collection, any success is entirely owed to the subject. She’s the one who made it work, not me.”

Mima said, “No, Rumi-chan is right. If you weren’t such a skilled photographer, these pictures wouldn’t have been so tasteful. Look at this page,” she said, opening the book. “If this photograph hadn’t been taken just right, it would have ended up trashy.”

The picture was of Mima wearing a little apron, and nothing else. A slash of light obscured her nipples from view but still left the picture remarkably risqué.

Rumi turned to another page and said, “This one is incredible, too.”

Mima was standing fully nude behind a pane of glass. Here and there the glass was slightly clouded over, the hazy patches conveniently obscuring only the most vital parts. But the rest of her was captured in perfect clarity. A quick glance might have given the impression she was on full display.

The collection was packed with pictures sexier than Ochiai Eri had ever managed, and Tadokoro felt sure that even people who weren't Mima's fans would want a copy.

The manager said, "These will be lined up at the front of the stores starting tomorrow, and Mima's CD single comes out the same day. That cross-promotion effect will be like nothing else. And since we haven't leaked any of the photos, I can't wait to see the looks on everyone's faces when they pick up the book."

He loosed a heartfelt belly laugh, then added, "All right, listen well, because I'm about to make a promise. Mima has put her heart and soul into this, and I won't let her efforts be wasted." With conviction in his voice, he stood. "'Sexy Valley' will take number one. You hear that, Mima? Number one. I guarantee it!"

Swept up by Tadokoro's impassioned vow, Mima found herself standing with him. "I'll promise, too," she said. "I'm taking number one! Say goodbye to the Charming Rose and say hello to the bombshell!"

## V

As night fell outside, the man sat in deep thought in his newly darkened room. With a furrowed brow, his mind fixated on one single thing —how to obtain his test subject, Ochiai Eri.

He had some measure of confidence in his physical strength, but no matter how strong he was, he was still human. Abducting her alone was a near impossibility. Rather than relying on his strength, perhaps he could devise some maneuver to lure her to his room?

He picked up the knife with Kirigoe Mima's relief in the handle. Whenever he held the weapon, an uncanny calm settled over him. Now it

provided him with a spark of hope, the confidence that the right idea was somewhere inside him, waiting to be found.

He stared into the weapon's blade. His reflection looked back at him from the sharpened and polished metal. His own face unnerved him—those fierce eyes reminded him of the evil cat-spirits in old ghost stories.

He attributed the look to the depth of his conviction.

He considered his options. *What if I soaked a rag with chloroform and hauled her in a taxi?* The man placed the knife back on his desk and folded his arms. *No, that won't work. Obtaining the drug would be difficult and getting caught with her unconscious body isn't something I could talk my way out of.* Under his breath, he muttered, "That won't do."

No matter how he went about it, abducting her carried too high a risk. The best way would be for Eri to come to his room of her own volition.

But how could he make her want to do it?

First, he imagined himself in her position. If he could put himself in her shoes, he might be able to understand the way she ticked. If he pulled that off, he might just be able to devise a scheme to get her here.

And so he pondered.

Eri had no morals. She lusted after men and had no reservations against taking them. The sooner the world was rid of her, the better. But promiscuous or not, she was still an idol.

Even a tramp like her still had to appeal to her fans *as* an idol. No matter what her character, she was no porno actress. That made her vulnerable to scandals. One that involved sex would be fatal even to her.

By holding the threat of such a scandal over her, the man reasoned, he could manipulate her freely. Getting her to come to his room would be easy.

The man picked up an idol magazine from the floor beside him. He turned through the pages and found the listing for the phone number of her managing agency, New Clear Vision. His plan was to call the office and ask for her fan club's contact number. Once they got to talking, fan club members tended to divulge an idol's schedule in much greater detail than their agency ever would.

Once he had her complete schedule, he would work backwards to find her free time—that's when he'd sleuth out the scandal he needed. He was prepared to follow her for days, if that's what it took.

But still, he needed to hurry. Time was running out; he couldn't afford to waste it. Every hour and every minute counted.

To save the Charming Rose, he needed to know the feel of an idol's skin.

# Chapter 6
# EXPERIMENT

## I

The television show *Nighttime Hit Parade* carried incredible influence. Artists who sang their new songs on the show saw a dramatic increase in CD sales the following week. On average, the program pulled in more than one in five households. Its continued success, despite the public's generally flagging interest in music shows, was nothing short of a miracle.

Securing an appearance on *Hit Parade* would be absolutely critical for Kirigoe Mima's new single to top the charts. For the best results, the performance had to come within the first three days of its release.

With those ends in mind, Tadokoro had personally visited the producer's home so many times that he'd lost track of the exact number, but it was definitely more than ten. The manager had championed Mima's star power to the producer, particularly stressing his desire to use the venue to unlock the singer's hidden
potential.

The producer had thought of Mima as merely a run-of-the-mill idol, but Tadokoro's passion began to soften the man's opinion. Then, on one particular visit, the producer finally gave the okay. Tadokoro was so elated he nearly cried.

The show was scheduled for four days after Mima's single hit the shelves, but the appearance could still provide the boost they needed to propel the song to the top of the charts. As he explained his success to Mima back at the office, he was again struck by his conviction that "Sexy Valley" would be a major hit.

Tadokoro said, "Mima, there's no better venue to launch a new song. I need you to give it your all!"

Mima nodded deeply. “Thank you, Bon-chan. I never dreamed I’d be able to perform on *Hit Parade*. I’ll give them a real show. Everybody’s going to see the new me!”

## II

The Roppongi sidewalks were as crowded as they were every other night. A fashionable woman walked arm-in-arm with a black man, stumbling occasionally as she went. A group of girls took in the nightlife, their caked-on makeup failing to hide the fact they were underaged. Young men put on their best Yakuza act, swaggering with puffed-out chests. There were heavy metal boys and punk girls alike. Most would probably still be present come morning, having tested their endurance through a sleepless night of revelry.

Cities have long been known as lonesome places. The more people get packed in together, the more individuals feel a paradoxical isolation. To distract themselves from loneliness, people seek each other out in bustling commercial districts like these.

In that sense, perhaps the gaudy neon lights, the towering cabinet signs, the marquee bulbs flashing in sequence—perhaps they all acted as a kind of bait to entice such lonely souls, much as carnivorous plants lure in insects with their brightly colored leaves and flowers.

But get away from Roppongi’s main streets, and the crowds fall off quickly. There, the sleepless district feels more like a ghost town.

Her face hidden behind large sunglasses, Ochiai Eri walked down a narrow back street. She nearly had the place to herself. Distant car horns echoed between the buildings, but the cars themselves stayed well away. Flanking the road were rowhouses whose façades had remained largely unchanged since postwar times. In their shadow, it was easy to forget one was in Roppongi.

At the end of the shabby street stood a small, two-story building with cracked and crumbling concrete walls—stores below, apartments above. Eri stopped in front of the building and looked up and down the street to make

sure no one was watching. Seeing no spying eyes, she hurried into the entrance, as if she'd been sucked inside.

The musty hallway within gave no suggestion of recent activity. But that was only natural, since out of the ten units, only one was a business—and that was an office on the second floor.

Eri ascended the staircase, the familiar sound of her footsteps echoing about her.

Murky light spilled out from a windowed door at the end of the second-floor walkway. A sign next to the door read SHINKO MUSIC PUBLISHING, INC. Officially, the company handled the publishing rights for Eri's CDs, but in truth, the company only existed as a tax dodge. It had only one employee, a female phone receptionist.

Eri unlocked the door with a key and stepped inside. The office was outfitted with a small couch and coffee table set along with two office desks. A sink in the corner was filled with haphazard stacks of dirty coffee cups.

Eri sat on the sofa and removed her sunglasses. She reached down to a mini fridge tucked in beside the couch, retrieved a can of beer, and drank it with satisfaction.

When the beer was gone, she glanced at her watch. It was after nine. Aran Naoto would be arriving any moment.

The rocker was a complete junkie and a womanizer, but when it came to his looks and physique, he was a perfect ten. But the best thing about him was his dick. Not only was it huge, but—maybe on account of all the drugs—it possessed unrivaled stamina.

Eri's thoughts wandered toward his muscular chest, and the warmth of anticipation spread below her waist. *Hurry up, Naoto,* she thought. *I want you now.* She pressed her hand between her legs, right as the door creaked open, and Naoto stepped inside.

"Eri," he said, "for the last time, you've got to stop telling me to meet you with so little notice—"

Before he could finish complaining, her fingers were on his zipper.

Naoto got up from the sofa, stretched his arms, then reached over to put on his T-shirt. As he watched Eri, lingering on the couch in nothing but her slip, he put a light to a Caster Mild.

Somewhat exasperated, he said, “You’re as rough as always.”

Eri pouted like a spoiled child. “I can’t help it. I’m in love.”

“You’re in love with me?”

“No.”

“But you’re in love.”

“With sex!” Eri said, then she sprang to her feet. With her milky skin, ample breasts, narrowed waist, and plump, firm bottom, she made a near eye-dazzling picture.

Naoto said, “I still can’t believe you’re doing the idol thing. You know, some of your fans would kill themselves if they saw us like this.” He put on his leather jacket and turned to leave. “But what’s that matter to me, anyway? See you later, Eri.”

Eri shouted, “Wait!” She thrust out her hands and said, “Naoto, you promised.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He thrust a hand into his jacket pocket and retrieved a photograph.

“Don’t you go forgetting on me. I didn’t call you here for the sex, you know.”

She snatched the photograph and stared at it intensely.

In the photo, Naoto had an arm around a woman’s shoulders, holding two fingers up in the V-sign.

The woman was, without a shred of doubt, Kirigoe Mima.

Eri’s expression twisted. The edges of her mouth shot up as she laughed, the sound gleeful and ominous in equal measure. “This is it,” she said. “This is all I need.”

Her smile was not that of an idol, but of a wild beast that had caught sight of its prey. For a second, the sight gave Naoto a start. “What are you going to do with that? It’s from two years ago.”

Eri's eyes snapped to him. Her voice was cold. "That's none of your concern. All you need to know is it's going to help me." Once again, Eri flashed that feral smile.

## III

At an intersection in Roppongi, Eri stood waiting for a taxi when someone called her name from behind.

Startled, she looked over her shoulder and saw a lone man standing there. With the neon lights at his back, she couldn't make out the details of his face, but something about the man's silhouette unsettled her.

A chill ran down her spine, but even if she felt creeped out, she felt more irritated than anything. *Damn it!* she thought. *I even took the back streets so that no one would see me.* Why now, of all times, did she have to get cornered by some weirdo fan?

She ignored him and returned her attention to the street. After a little time the man repeated, "Eri-san," but this time, she didn't turn around.

She needed that taxi to come before she'd be forced to deal with some miserable fan.

"Eri-san," he said again, this time loud enough to startle her.

Eri turned around to face him. Behind her sunglasses, anger burned in her eyes.

"Listen, you," she said. "Don't talk to me. This is my private time. Can you get that through your head?"

Undaunted, the man stepped toward her.

On reflex, Eri took one step back.

The man was larger than he had seemed at first glance. Long, messy hair hung down in front of his face and cast a gloomy shade over his features. He wore an old, ratty T-shirt and dirty jeans.

"Eri-san!" the man shouted. Behind his dangling bangs glistened two tiny, gleaming eyes, staring at her.

Eri glared back with all the intensity she could muster. “You just don’t shut up, *do* you? What do you want with me? If it’s my autograph you’re after, then fine—you can have it—but then leave me alone!”

The man licked his dried lips and muttered, “E-Eri-san, I don’t need your autograph.” He held something out to Eri. It was a small disposable camera.

“You want a picture?” Eri asked. “All right. Just be quick about it.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t want your picture.”

In full irritation, Eri demanded, “Then what? What do you want? Aren’t you a fan of mine?”

“I’m not your fan.”

“If you’re not my fan, then just go away.”

“I’m not going away,” the man said firmly. “I need something from you. So I’m not going away.”

Eri gave him an exasperated shrug. “You’re making absolutely no sense at all. You don’t need my autograph, you don’t want my picture, and you’re not even my fan, and yet you need something from me? Just tell me what the hell this is about!”

The man sniffed. “I have a favor to ask of you. Although, technically speaking, it’s less of a favor and more of a command.”

“A command?”

“That’s right. I want you to come to my room.”

For a moment, Eri appeared confused, but eventually her cheeks turned red with rage.

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying?” she demanded. “You’re insane. Why the hell would I ever go to your room? Get real!”

The man held out a palm to stop her outburst. “It’s an order. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you.”

“Y-you’re crazy. Get away from me. If you don’t, I’ll scream for help!”

“If you want to scream, then go right ahead.” Again, he showed her the disposable camera. “Do you know what this is? Sure you do. It’s a camera. But do you know what pictures are in this camera?”

The man’s expression contorted into something nasty. “*You* know what’s in this camera,” he said. “The sex you just had. You and that tall man. That’s what’s in there. I have his penis going into you. That’s what happens when you don’t lock the door.”

Eri felt like a hammer had just knocked into her skull. After she had been so careful not to be seen with Naoto, this man had found her. And worse still, he’d taken pictures. Eri’s mind went on overdrive.

*If these pictures go public, my life as an idol is over. There’s no talking my way out of being naked, on a couch, in the arms of a lover. For now, I need to do what he says until I can think of some way to take that camera from him. If he wants me to go to his room, he must be after sex. That would be a small price to pay for that camera.*

Eri gave him a grin. “Oh, so you have pictures?” she said casually. “Guess I don’t have a choice, then. All right. I’ll go with you to your room.”

## IV

As soon as Eri set foot into the man’s room, she began to cough violently. The stench of rotting meat filled the dwelling.

“It stinks in here,” she said, waving her hand in front of her face in a futile attempt to clear away the smell.

The man locked the door behind her and flatly stated, “It’s rotting skin.”

In confusion, Eri said, “Skin?”

“Yeah. A little girl’s skin.”

Eri nodded, just to move things along, but she failed to comprehend the gravity of what he’d just said. Then, noticing the piles of video tapes that filled the room, she spoke in surprise. “What are all those tapes?”

The man kept an eye on her as he slid open the door to his closet and dug around for something within. Finally finding what he sought, he emerged with a roll of brown packing tape.

Watching for an opportunity to steal the camera and run, Eri made her herself sound pleasant. “Oh, so you want to box up all these cassettes, is that it? Let me help you with that.”

The man peeled off a strip of tape and lunged at Eri, taking her by surprise and tackling her to the floor.

Flailing her arms and legs, Eri shouted, “Wh-what are you doing?”

Putting his entire weight upon her, he efficiently worked the tape to bind her limbs together. First wrists, then ankles.

Robbed of her freedom, Eri rolled about on the floor like a caterpillar. She unleashed a barrage of curses at him, adding, “Do you think I’ll let you get away with this? This is a crime. Once I tell the cops, they’ll arrest you in no time. But look, if you take off this tape—*just take off this tape*—then I won’t say a word to the
police.”

The man’s face remained placid throughout her verbal assault. As she struggled on the floor, his beady eyes kept flicking to the opening of her skirt. These glances didn’t escape Eri’s attention.

“How about we make a deal?” she said. “You want to fuck me, don’t you? That’s fine. I’ll let you. But in return, you’ll untape me first. Untape me and give me that camera, and my body is yours.” She punctuated the offer with a suggestive twist of her hips.

The man loosed a howl and flung himself upon her with crazed desire. With her hands and feet still bound, he tore off her clothing. With his powerful muscles, her lightweight blouse and black leather skirt were quickly reduced to shreds.

“W-wait a second,” the idol protested. “I told you I’d have sex with you, didn’t I? So—so just take off this tape!”

Ignoring her words completely, the man brought his lips to slither around her nipples. Their pink, firm tips pushed back at him inside his mouth.

Eri moaned, her face twisted in pain.

The man sucked in her breast so forcefully she feared it might come right off her chest. At the same time, he ran his right hand across her face. His hand moved from her face to her neck, then down to her chest, and further—to her stomach, and below. When his hand reached her black, low-rise panties, he tore the garment away.

## V

Her hands and feet still bound by tape, Eri regarded the man with scorn. A sticky mass coated her partway below her stomach. The sensation disgusted her, but her mind worked at finding a path to freedom.

Kicking her feet, she said, “Well? You’re finished, aren’t you? Are you satisfied now? Then let me go.”

With the post-release spasms still running through his body, the man desperately fought to keep his rising anger in check.

Twisting herself, Eri whined, childlike, “Come on, let me go. That’s the deal.” Each kick of her legs introduced a slight change in the shape of her exposed pubic mound. As he watched the shifting shape, something snapped in his mind, and suddenly he was straddling her.

“You!” he howled and slapped her face. “You bitch!”

Crazed, the man slapped her, again and again.

As Eri cried out, she kicked up her entwined legs at the man’s back, catching him by surprise and sending him teetering. She curled up her body like a shrimp to evade his next strike.

“What are you doing?” she shouted. “Don’t you see you’re hurting me? Have you lost your mind?”

The man’s shoulders rose as he took a deep breath, and once again he was on top of her, grappling with her.

As if possessed, the man shouted, “You, you, you!” He begin pinching her, all over her body.

With each rough pinch, Eri cried out in pain. She spat on his face. “Stop it!” the idol yelled, as rage burned in her eyes. “What did I ever do to you? You’re the one who brought me here. You’re the one who tied me up. You’re the one who had his way with me.”

The man wiped away her spit with a finger and pointed at her in total earnestness.

“It’s you women. You’re all crazy.” As the man spoke, his anger built and he started swinging his arms in the air. “And *you* are too, always putting yourself on TV dressed like a whore. Am I wrong? You’re always wanting men to put their things inside you. You women are filthy through and through.”

Eri laughed out her nose and sat up and faced him. “Call me a filthy whore all you like, but who’s the one who brought me here and did filthy things to me? That was all you.”

The man grabbed her arms. “That’s not true! I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. Yes, I brought you here. But—but it wasn’t to have sex with you. You’re the one who made me do all that! *You’re* the one who made me want it.”

Eri showed him a shrug. “Believe what you want. But if that’s how you think it works, you could say it about any woman. There isn’t a woman out there that doesn’t make a man feel desire. If there is, she’d have to be really ugly.”

The man responded with an almost inhuman shriek. His already high-pitched voice took on an even more ghastly edge as he cried, “Is *that* what you have to say for yourself?”

Not following him, Eri furrowed her eyebrows.

The man repeated, “Is that what you have to say for yourself?”

He continued, saying, “That’s how you women always talk. You try to conceal your depravity. Well, I’ll state this as clear as can be—whatever else is true, you, Ochiai Eri, are filthy. You don’t deserve to be an idol!”

The man scooped up an armful of video tapes from the piles around him. “I love idols. You see all these mountains of tapes? They’re all

recordings of idols. I want women to have purity, and these idols symbolized that innocence."

Eri snorted and said, "I hate to shatter your fantasy, but I've seen a lot of idols, and not *one* of them is pure."

The man threw the cassettes against the floor. "You… you don't have to tell me that. I already know it. Again and again and again, they tricked me with their false appearances." Tears began to well in his eyes. "But rather than give up… I've kept on seeking that purity—believing it was out there somewhere. Knowing that one innocent idol had to be out there. That's why I've kept watching them."

The man's voice began cracking into a tearful falsetto. "But there's something I need for you to know." He leveled his stare right at Eri. "Kirigoe Mima. She's your exact opposite. She's nothing like you at all. She is every bit the innocent girl an idol is supposed to be."

Eri tossed him an exasperated look before laughing deep from her throat. "Kirigoe-chan, you say? I hate her. That cutesy act of hers is as fake as they come!" As Eri spoke, she caught sight of the life-size poster of the idol on the wall. Understanding now, she nodded and said, "You're her fan, aren't you? What could you possibly see in her?"

The man slapped her across the face. "Don't you *dare* speak that way about Mima-san! Unlike you, she's pure to the core of her soul."

Face contorted by stinging pain, Eri still managed a sarcastic laugh. "It's impressive how little you know. I take it from this huge collection of idol tapes that you've never actually dated a real woman, so how could you be expected to know how women feel? Well, you know what? Maybe an idol like Kirigoe Mima suits a pervert like you after all."

The man pinched her lips shut. "Have you said enough yet? I'm only going to tell you once. If you utter one more groundless insult toward her, I'll stop being so forgiving."

Eri shook her head to free her lips and said, "I'm not finished. Open my handbag and take a look inside. You'll find something interesting." She jerked her chin toward the purse near her feet.

The man picked it up and asked, "In here?"

Eri nodded.

The man opened the purse and looked inside. He saw a notebook and some makeup supplies among the jumbled assortment of objects.

Eri said, “Look down at the bottom. There’s a photograph. Do you see it?”

The man reached inside the bag and found a single photograph near the bottom. Hurriedly, he pulled it out. The second he saw what was on it, the blood drained from his face.

It was a picture of a man with his arm wrapped around Kirigoe Mima’s shoulders—and hers wrapped around his.

## VI

In a green room adjacent to CRS-TV’s basement-level recording studio, Mima sat drinking bitter coffee. She had hardly touched the pork cutlet sandwich Rumi had brought her. *Nighttime Hit Parade* was upon her, and the idol felt so nervous she worried she might break out in a cold sweat.

“Rumi-chan, Rumi-chan!” Mima called out to her assistant, waiting in the next room over.

“Yes?” Rumi called as she came jogging in.

“Could you get me another cup of coffee? Black.”

With a friendly smile, Rumi said, “Mima-san, you must be pretty nervous.”

“I feel like my chest is going to explode,” Mima said, but she returned the smile regardless.

When Rumi came back with a fresh cup of coffee, Mima stood before the full-length mirror, checking her costume. The idol tugged at the hem of her micro skirt, muttering, “It’s so short. If I try to dance in these, they’ll get a panty shot for *sure*.”

Giggling, Rumi set Mima’s coffee cup down on the counter. “You look very sexy—and that ribbon on the back is totally cute. Your fans will

be delighted."

Mima took the cup in hand and gulped down the hot coffee. She glanced at the clock on the wall. "Less than twenty minutes now." Then she said, "I'm going to do the best I can. I'm going to think of it as the first performance of my new life. I'll give it my all. Just you watch."

## VII

The man felt shaken to his core. *It can't be true. It can't be. It can't be.* Again and again he thought to himself, *It can't be true. Not her. Not Mima-san….*

He had believed in her purity. Surely she must have been a virgin—or so he had thought.

But now his faith had been cruelly dashed by that single photograph, the grinning couple with their arms over each other's shoulders. The man stared at the picture with eyes so wide they threatened to leap from their sockets.

"Well?" Eri said, sounding vaguely irritated. "Now do you see who she really is?"

The man turned his stare to her. His expression was strange, unreadable, like he could just as easily laugh or cry.

He said, "Yes, I see it now. I know what I must do. To be honest, right up until this moment, I still had some doubts. But now everything is clear. If there's no future for my convictions, then there'll be no tomorrow for her—or for me."

The man reached into a paper bag and withdrew the cloth-wrapped knife.

Eri spoke firmly. "I've shown you who Mima really is, so set me free. You don't need me anymore."

But the man shook his head. "No, I still have a use for you. There's something you must do… for my and Mima's sake."

“For you and Mima? I’ll pass. Now come on, get this tape off me!” Eri thrust her bound wrists in front of the man.

As if exasperated, he put his palm to his forehead. He said, “You don’t understand anything, do you? You…” He sighed and started over. “Look, do you have any idea why I brought you here?”

“Of course I don’t!”

“That’s what I figured. If you knew, you wouldn’t be feeling so brave. All right, I’ll tell you. You see, you’re my test subject—my guinea pig.”

Eri’s eyes went wide. “Your test subject?” The words filled her with immediate dread.

“That’s right,” the man said, flashing a yellowed smile. “In my experiment.”

“Experiment?” Fear filled her eyes as she tried to back herself into the corner. Her voice trembled. “What experiment?”

“Well, that’s not so easy a question to answer. I’d give you the full explanation, but we just don’t have the time for that now. I can give you the short version: I want to take off your skin.”

Eri gaped at him. “What? My—my skin?” She couldn’t wrap her mind around the words.

The man approached the curled-up idol singer where she lay in the corner of the room. He lifted her to her feet.

“I’m going to take off your skin.” His voice rose higher, until he began to yell. “How is that so hard to understand?”

With incredible strength, he pushed her back until her spine was pressed against a beam in the kitchen. He bound her to the support, wrapping the tape around and around, layer over layer, until escape was impossible.

Inspecting his work with pride, the man said, “Now you won’t be going anywhere.”

Using her head and her feet—the only parts of her body she could still move—Eri struggled fiercely, but for some reason, didn’t say anything.

Maybe she had imagined the dreadful fate that awaited her and sheer terror had stolen away her words.

The man unwrapped his treasured knife from its cloth and let out a deep breath. No matter how many times he looked at the weapon, it always had the ability to calm him. At the same time, the feel of Kirigoe Mima's image in its handle gave him a high. The sharpened blade glimmered with power and danger.

His heart cried out for him to act.

Putting the knife in his right hand, he stepped toward Eri. He felt a primal energy building within him. His heart began beating faster, more intensely. Sticky beads of sweat dripped from his forehead.

Eri's eyes were so wide her eyelids threatened to split apart entirely. Cracked and dry, her lips trembled like the beak of a trapped bird, as she finally managed to squeak out, "What—what is that? What are you doing? What are you going to do with that knife?"

Paying no heed to her questions, the man grasped her head, fingers like an eagle with talons in its prey. With his other hand, he pressed the knife's tip at the base of her scalp.

Eri's body froze solid.

And then she screamed with everything she had, her shrieks ringing through the room. She shook her head back and forth in crazed panic.

The man tightened his grip. "If you keep moving, you could ruin everything! You can't move. If you move, I'll cut into places I shouldn't, so just stay still. I don't want to harm your skin."

He leaned his arm in against the base of her neck to keep her head in place. "Eri-chan," he said. "This won't hurt. I promise it won't hurt." He put the knife back into position at the base of her hairline. Slowly, smoothly, he moved the blade.

A red line appeared and traced across her scalp. Sharp and bitter pain twisted her expression. "Stop! No, stop!" Eri cried, vainly trying to kick her legs.

But the man's powerful arm kept her head firmly in place.

“Now, now, don’t struggle,” the man said gently. “If you struggle, it’s only going to make this hurt more than it has to.” He kept moving the knife. The blade’s tip passed across her temple, then followed the line of her jaw all the way back up to the opposite side.

The man was impressed by how easily the edge cut. He hardly had to apply any pressure at all as he glided the blade across her skin.

At last, the knife had finished a full circuit. Streams of blood draped down across her torso like a veil of reddest silk.

The whites of her eyes blotted out by red, Eri mumbled in machinelike repetition: “It hurts, it hurts, it hurts…”

## VIII

Mima’s soft but athletic thighs peeked out from her white wrap skirt. Every time she stepped to the beat, the skirt offered further glimpses, while her hips swayed in seductive rhythm. Her low-cut tank top bared the deep valley between her breasts, and when she shook her body, it set her bosom swaying. Droplets of sweat traced little arcs as they danced from her forehead to the base of her neck.

Tadokoro watched Mima’s performance on the monitors in the studio control room.

Next to him, the director of *Nighttime Hit Parade* said, “This is great television.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Tadokoro replied. “And I’m not just saying that as her manager.”

The director said, “Looks like we can call her new image a success.”

Tadokoro nodded in great satisfaction. “A *huge* success, if you ask me. But it’ll all depend on how the viewers take it.”

Rumi came into the control room. Her cheeks were flushed.

“Tadokoro-san,” she said, “I just heard from our office. Our phones have been ringing off the hook!”

“What for?” Tadokoro said.

“What do you mean, what for? Everyone’s calling about Mima-san’s new song. The moment she came on the TV, our office has been flooded with calls!” Rumi punctuated the news with a little fist pump. Tadokoro smiled so wide his cheeks flushed red.

“That many, huh?” the manager said. “That’s a relief. It means all of Mima’s hard work has paid off.”

Tadokoro glanced at the monitor bay where Mima was finishing the second chorus. Then he looked back at Rumi and gestured her closer. “Rumi-chan,” he said, “let’s give Mima a little surprise. I want you to put together a party, but don’t tell her a word about it. It’ll be you and me—and let’s invite Yuji, too. We’ll celebrate Mima’s new image.”

Rumi’s eyes sparkled. “That’s a great idea! I’m sure Mima-san will be thrilled.” She couldn’t have been more excited than if the party had been for her.

Gentle admiration in his eyes, Tadokoro instructed, “Go to Mima’s apartment and get everything ready. You can buy anything you need at the convenience store down the street. The agency can write off the expense.”

He pulled a few ten-thousand yen notes from his pocket and handed them to Rumi, who bobbed her head in thanks before going back out of the room.

Tadokoro popped his head out from the door and shouted after her, “I’ll take care of Mima and Yuji. You just make sure everything is ready for us!”

Rumi, who was already jogging down the hall, glanced over her shoulder and called back cheerfully, “Got it!”

Tadokoro waved at her and went back into the control room. Mima had just finished her song.

## IX

Talking to himself, the man said, “This is the hard part,” and then he pushed the knife-edge into the incision.

With his other hand holding Eri’s bangs up out of the way, he slid the knife in between her skin and the flesh underneath. He wielded the blade carefully, like a chef skinning a prize fish.

Between the loss of blood and the psychological shock, the bloody-faced idol had no more energy to resist. But she still kept throwing off his concentration. Every once in a while, her body jolted as if she had touched a high voltage wire, and she kept on mumbling curses and vows of revenge.

He thought about stabbing her right in the heart to stop her for good, but he wanted the skin of a live subject, and so he preserved in the face of temptation, patiently continuing his work. As he slid his knife into the cut, he slowly and gradually severed the connection between her outer skin and the dermis beneath.

If he went too deep, the skin would be too thick and fleshy. But if his cuts went too shallow, he would destroy the precious outer layer. Finding and keeping that balance was incredibly difficult and had him working with great caution.

Because of this, it took several minutes just to peel the skin from her forehead alone. As he carefully inspected the drooping strip of skin, he muttered, “This is going to be tougher than I thought.”

Some time later, the VCR’s recording timer went off. Its spools whirred to life, and light came to the TV’s tube.

“Oh!” the man exclaimed, reflexively turning to the screen.

*Nighttime Hit Parade* was on.

*That’s right*, the man remembered, *Kirigoe Mima’s live performance is tonight.* The man had set the timer three days before. *She’s supposed to perform at the top of the show.*

The man set the bloody knife—which he was still clutching, though his bloody work was through—down on the table and sat in front of the TV.

Shortly after, the opening of “Sexy Valley” came over the speakers. Mima appeared, center screen.

When he saw her appearance, the man swallowed thickly. The large ribbon in her hair, the lively eyes, those still felt like Mima, but the rest of her was an entirely different person—seductive cleavage, a waist tightly bound, a skirt short enough to reveal the plumpness of her thighs.

The man had seen her in costume on *Music Town*, and now, as then, the shock of it came like a hammer blow to his head. Only this time, the shock felt good, for no longer did he have to sit and watch her change into someone she wasn't.

Through his painstaking efforts, he had tested out his means of saving her, and the results had been most favorable. The man glanced to the kitchenette, where the skin from Eri's face clung to a countertop of stainless steel.

The forehead area had been hard work, but once he got the hang of it, he was able to let go of his excess caution and make bolder movements with the knife. The part from the cheek to the chin especially had gone easier than expected.

He felt ready.

The man switched off the VCR and got to his feet. He picked up the knife and wiped off the sticky mixture of blood and oil with a tissue. On the kitchen counter lay a small whetstone made for sharpening cooking knives. He brought the weapon over to it and began passing its edge across the stone. When he was satisfied, he wrapped the knife in a cloth and deposited the bundle in a paper shopping bag. Then he took down the life-sized poster of Mima from the time of her debut, rolled it up, and dropped it into the bag with the knife. Finally, he took a fresh T-shirt and a pair of jeans from their hangers in his closet and changed into them.

This was it. He was ready now. All that remained was the execution of his plan.

He would finish this today.

He believed he knew where Mima would go after her live performance—her apartment, almost assuredly. And it was late enough in the evening that her manager and assistant were unlikely to come by.

The man would catch her alone and take her to the place he had in mind. There, he would perform the ritual—the ritual of transformation, the

ritual to make Mima herself again.

He felt an indescribable power swelling up from the innermost part of him. A sublime and noble power, he felt, born from purity of will and his selfless conviction to sacrifice himself for Mima.

The man turned his gaze to Eri, who was still strapped to the support column. Her body had gone slack and remained completely still. The blood that had dripped from her face formed a pool around her on the kitchen floor.

Originally, the man had planned on flaying her completely. But he didn't have the time for so extensive a test anymore.

*It'll be fine,* the man told himself, brimming with optimism. The rest of the body should skin easier than the face. He didn't need practice to succeed at the real thing. All that worried him was how long he would be able to remain alive after his own skin was off. Judging by the motionless idol in his kitchen, it wouldn't be that long.

*But I'm not Ochiai Eri*, the man thought. *I'm stronger. Through willpower alone, I'll stay alive for at least a few hours.*

He couldn't die until Mima was truly saved.

No matter what happened, he needed to live that long.

Feeling the weight of his responsibility, the man trembled with the excitement of a warrior anticipating battle. He put on his leather shoes and gave his room one last look over his shoulder. He gazed upon the mounds of video tapes and seared the image of the place into his memory.

Then a question came to him. *What should I do about Eri?*

If he left her here, the police would eventually come and bother him.

But then the man laughed out loud. *What am I thinking? Everything will be over by the end of the day. Who cares about the police?*

He opened his apartment door and stepped out toward the destiny he had made for himself. A deep, emotional exhilaration rushed from his heels to the top of his head.

Soon, he and Mima would be one.

# Chapter 7
# OMEN

## I

Mima faced the camera and nailed her final pose, leg raised high. When the assistant director gave her the okay sign, she took in deep, shoulder-raising breaths.

Her head felt heavy. She slumped over, her arms resting on her thighs and her back arched. She held that position for a while. The nervousness and exhilaration had evaporated in an instant, and now she felt that if she moved another muscle she might collapse on the spot.

Then, with conscious effort, she pushed strength into the muscles at her core and stood up straight. She felt better immediately.

With slow footsteps, the idol headed for her green room. She left the recording studio and was proceeding down the narrow hallway when Tadokoro came to meet her. Her manager wore a secretive smile. Maybe he saw strong CD sales on the way.

"What a show!" he said, draping a pink cardigan over her shoulders. Keeping his arm around her, he walked her to the green room.

When she didn't see her assistant inside, Mima asked, "Where's Rumi-chan?"

Still grinning, Tadokoro said, "She went home already."

"Oh, she did?" Mima's shoulders drooped in disappointment. "I'd hoped we could go out for some tea or something on our way home."

"That wasn't very nice of her, then," Tadokoro said matter-of-factly. He produced a taxi voucher from his pocket and handed it to Mima. "Go on home. Get some rest tonight."

Then he gave her a wave goodbye and left.

Suddenly alone in the green room, Mima felt suddenly overcome by loneliness.

“What’s with them?” she said to no one. “How could they leave me by myself at a time like this? I don’t know what Rumi has going on, but it can’t be so important she had to just run off like that.” Mima puffed out her cheeks. “This is so lame.”

She threw off her costume and unceremoniously stuffed it into her bag, before quickly changing back into street clothes.

When she exited the TV station’s rear doors, a cluster of passionate fans—all men—were waiting for her, heedless of the late-night hour. When they saw the idol, they waved at her and broke out into cheers. She gave the men a smile and a little wave before climbing into her waiting taxi.

As she looked at her fans from the rear passenger window, a pang of anxiety bloomed inside her, an almost physical pain in her chest. The feeling confused her—where could it come from? She put both hands to her breast as the anxiety deepened into relentless dread.

She asked herself, *What am I worrying about? The sales of my single? Where my life goes from here?* No. It wasn’t either of those things. It was something more urgent—something far, far more urgent.

Suddenly, she heard the voice speaking inside her.

*Mi-Mima-san…*

And then she knew what it was she feared.

She was worried about that stalker. In all the excitement over the debut of her new song, she had nearly forgotten about that creep. But now his specter had begun reasserting its dominance over her thoughts.

But why *now*? Why was he causing her all this distress all of a sudden?

Mima shook her head forcefully, trying to banish his shadow from her mind. Rather than vanish, the phantom’s presence loomed larger still.

Mima’s sixth sense knew.

Step by inexorable step, that dreadful stalker was coming for her, a vicious beast, fangs bared.

# II

Short of breath, her arms filled with bags, Rumi climbed the stairs to Mima's apartment. She had to hurry if she wanted to be ready before Mima came home.

Once she reached the apartment door, she fumbled for the key and opened the lock. She scurried to the kitchen and placed the plastic convenience store bags on the counter. Various canned goods and fresh fruit spilled out from the bags. She set the ingredients out efficiently, thinking through the menu in her head—*hors d'oeuvres, salad, and then a creamy vegetable soup for the main dish*.

*I'm so glad Mima-san's new song is going to be a hit!* she thought with a little smile.

Perhaps even more than the singer herself, Rumi had been worried about what would happen if Mima's fans rejected her new direction. When Rumi's dreams of becoming an idol were broken, Mima had become her emotional bedrock. By projecting her dreams onto Mima, Rumi had found a new purpose in life.

Rumi didn't know how Mima saw their relationship, but to Rumi—at least in a sense—the two of them were one unit. Mima's happiness was Rumi's happiness; Mima's sadness was Rumi's sadness.

From the bottom of her heart, she hoped Mima would become Japan's top musical artist, and the assistant had pinned much of those hopes on this new song. After all, it was the first step for the singer to grow from a mere pop idol into a true artist.

To Rumi's delight, the new single was on its way to becoming a huge hit. She couldn't wait for Mima to come home so she could congratulate her.

She looked at her watch. It was just past eleven. *Any time now,* she thought.

Redoubling her speed, she began peeling the onions when there was a knock at the door. Rumi looked up from her work with some confusion.

*Who could it be at this hour?*

*Not Mima-san,* Rumi thought, her body stiffening. Mima-san would have used her key to unlock the door.

The assistant cautiously approached the door. *Oh, that's right,* she thought, relaxing. *It must be Tadokoro-san.*

Letting out a breath of relief, she unlocked the door. Maybe that Murano Yuji would be with him. She thought of his carefree smile and blushed.

She turned the knob and opened the door, revealing the dim glow of the hallway's nighttime lights. Standing in their illumination was a lone man.

Rumi gasped.

It wasn't the manager. It certainly wasn't Murano Yuji.

Who was it, then?

She stared at the man's face. A warm bead of sweat ran down her spine.

She had seen this man before, somewhere. But where?

Suddenly, it came to her. She recoiled and moved to shut the door. This was the last person in the entire world she ever wanted to see again. It was the man who had stood in the hall outside the K-TV green room, hidden in the shadows of the steel emergency exit door.

When she had faced him then, she'd been too scared to look upon his face. Even now, the murky hallway light left most of his features obscured by darkness. But she had no doubt that this man and the one she had faced before were one and the same.

It was his smell that did it—a dreadful smell she had never encountered before that day—or since.

Faster than Rumi could close the door, the man's hand was on the knob. With incredible strength, he forced the door back open, sending her tumbling to the entrance floor.

The man stepped inside, and for the first time she got a clear look at him.

His long, disheveled hair hung over a craggy, angular face with little eyes, a big nose, and thick lips. He stood with a slouch and was stocky around the waist.

The man spoke. “You’re that assistant girl.” His voice was hoarse and unpleasant.

Still on the floor, a wide-eyed Rumi looked up at him and nodded once.

“You’re Mima-san’s assistant,” the man said.

Rumi nodded again and again.

“Well, I want you to assist *me* now,” he said with a smirk, strangely and vaguely shy. He looked her in the eyes while she shook her head violently from side to side.

“No!” she shouted. “Absolutely not. Who do you think you are, coming into another person’s home like this?”

The man leaned over her, right down into her face. He stared her down. “I’m going to make you come with me whether you like it or not. Look me in the eye. Do you see how serious I am? I want your help and I’m getting it.”

Rumi pushed at him with both hands and said, “Don’t get any closer! I’ll call for help. The walls here are thin. Someone will come right away!”

She got to her feet. She was ready to scream the moment he tried to do anything else. The apartment building was occupied mostly by families. If she screamed, especially at this hour, someone would surely come running.

She returned his stare, speaking firmly, “Now go home.”

The man’s lips curled up at both edges. “I’ll be going nowhere. Not until you agree to come with me, that is. And you *will* come with me, be sure of that. You don’t have any choice.”

In a calm motion, he reached for his rear jeans pocket and pulled out a photograph.

“Look at this,” he said, holding the picture in front of her face.

When she saw it, she let out a little cry. It was a picture of Mima and Aran Naoto together.

“You know what this picture means,” the man said. “The media would *love* to get their hands on this. But you wouldn’t want that to happen, now, would you?”

Rumi shook her head no, tears filling her eyes.

“If I offer you this picture,” he said, “you’ll help me, won’t you? It won’t take long.”

Wiping her eyes, Rumi nodded.

## III

*Why isn’t the door locked?* Mima wondered, standing at her apartment door. She remained there for a moment, hand on the doorknob, head tilted, while she dredged her memory, wondering if she’d forgotten to lock the door before she had left.

She didn’t think that was the case, but no other explanation came to her.

She deliberately avoided connecting the unlocked door with the shapeless dread that still lurked in the in the pit of her stomach. If she had thought the two were related, she never would have been able to set foot inside.

Slowly, she pushed the door open and, heart thumping away, she stepped in. The apartment’s lights were on, and her answering machine was switched off.

*Did I really leave the apartment like this?* Exasperation over her carelessness edged out her fear.

Then she smelled something. It smelled good, and it was coming from the kitchenette. She looked that way and saw a wide variety of food neatly laid out on the counter.

Mima clapped her hands in realization. Rumi had come over. Now that Mima thought about it, her manager had been acting strangely, too.

From the look on his face, Bon-chan *had* seemed like he'd been hiding something.

*So Bon-chan wanted to throw me a surprise party. Rumi didn't leave early—he must've sent her out to get things ready.*

"Rumi-chan," the singer called out. But there was no answer. "Rumi-chan!"

Mima circled her room. She even looked in her closet, and in the shower room and the water closet. Rumi was nowhere to be found. She'd been cooking, that much was certain. But what had stopped her—and where had she gone?

Maybe she'd forgotten some ingredient and ran off to get it at the convenience store? Surely she would have locked the door if she had had to leave the apartment empty.

What had happened to her?

Mima returned to the front door, opened it, and looked outside. Perhaps Rumi was out in the hallway. The dimly lit space gave no sign of any presence—not Rumi's, not *anyone's*. Only the cold, nighttime air occupied the passageway.

Mima closed the door and sat in the foyer.

Her concern expressed itself as irritation. She thought, *If Rumi were going to leave, she could have at* least *written a note.*

Sitting there stewing about it wasn't going to help anything. Mima shook away her foul temper and slowly stood back up. That was when her eyes caught sight of a small red object next to her pumps beside the door. Mima stooped down to pick it up. The thing looked like a small scrap of colored paper.

She held it in her hand and inspected it. Whatever it was, she had probably stepped on it and gotten it stuck to the bottom of her shoe. She wadded it up to throw it away, and her fingers became wet with a faintly red liquid.

It was a rose petal—a red rose petal.

*A red rose petal!*

Instantly, with that realization, her blood froze. Unbidden, her sixth sense began clamoring inside her thoughts. *A rose petal. A red rose petal.…*

Her primal intuition roused the fear and anxiety she had so assiduously tried to forget. They emerged from the edges of her consciousness and came out into the open, no longer possible to ignore, their heads held high and arms spread wide.

Desperately, Mima tried to banish the truth from her thoughts; if she let herself appreciate what that rose petal signified, her mind would fall to pieces.

Mima needed a lifeline. She went to the phone. She'd reach out to her manager, have him come over.

She didn't know where he was. He could have been at the television station, or his own apartment, or at the agency's office. But she needed to find him and get him here. If she didn't, she worried this incomprehensible terror would soon drive her mad.

Fretfully, she reached for the phone, when suddenly, it rang.

On conditioned reflex, her hand went to the receiver. Subconsciously, she knew she shouldn't answer, but her hand, unbidden, had already lifted the receiver and placed it against her ear.

"Hello," came the man's voice. "Is… is this Mima-san?"

Mima felt the last fragile barriers of denial fall, leaving no separation between her conscious mind and subconscious terror. Her body trembled as she heard the hoarse voice speak. "Hello, Mima-san? This is Mima-san, isn't it?"

It was the voice of the man who had tormented her over the phone, the sick stalker who had given Rumi that letter—the same one who had personally delivered another message to her very door.

Her voice shaking, Mima said, "What do you want? Who are you?"

"Who am I? You know who I am, Mima-san." The man's voice took on a mocking tone. "It is I, your Darling Rose."

Starting to reclaim her composure, Mima resolved to get this creep to give up his location so that she could send the police after him. "All right, 'Darling Rose,'" she said, "what do you want with me?"

“I’m glad you asked,” the man said. “I’m calling to request your presence. You can’t say no, mind you. I’ll wait five minutes. Come to my location within five minutes. I’m in K-TV’s old studio in Azabu. If you run from your apartment, you should get here in about four to five minutes. But five is what you have. If you try to contact your manager or the police, you won’t make it in time, so don’t try it. Five minutes, starting now.”

The man sounded as if he were going to hang up the phone. Before he could, Mima said, “What are you talking about? There’s no way I’m going to some abandoned studio. Just tell me your name and where you live, and I’ll meet you there instead.”

“You won’t come? That won’t do at all. You know Rumi-chan, don’t you?”

“Rumi? What’s happened to her?”

“Nothing has happened to her yet. But if you don’t come here, she’s going to die. If you’re even one second late, she will die.”

“Wh-what are you saying? Is she there with you?”

Mima pressed the receiver to her ear. She could hear Rumi’s voice, faint and distant, saying, “Mima-san… Don’t come… don’t come.”

In blind fury, Mima shouted, “You have Rumi?! You have *Rumi*?!”

“That’s right. And if you don’t come, she dies. This is not a joke. I killed that whore Ochiai Eri, you know—one more kill won’t make a difference to me.”

The man’s voice had grown flat, detached, and somehow that was even more forboding than before. Mima believed it. He really had killed Eri.

“All right,” she said. “I’m coming. The old K-TV. I just want you to let Rumi go.”

“If you come, I’ll spare her life. I promise you that. But you’d better hurry. Here we are still talking, and you’re already down to four minutes.”

# Chapter 8
# CONFRONTATION

## I

Mima ran.

She ran through the nighttime streets. She ran until her legs ached, until her heart strained—but still she ran. She weaved through Tokyo's south-central Azabu district, moving through back roads lined by quiet, upscale apartments and residences, turning right here, left there.

She wondered how long it had been since she ran like this. In her first year of high school, she'd placed fifth in her school's marathon race. That was probably it.

She'd walked from her apartment to the old K-TV studio building once before. She had no reason to measure how long it took, but it had to have been more than ten minutes.

*I don't know how that freak kidnapped Rumi, but he's using her to get to me.* He'd threatened to kill her if she was even one second late.

Mima spurred her aching feet into a full-on sprint. As she ran, she felt her thoughts grow clear. A cold rage against her stalker began to swell throughout her body. If she said she wasn't afraid, she would have been lying, but far more anger filled her heart than fear.

She had only known this man through his calls and his letters, but his voice and his handwriting had revealed enough of his character to thoroughly repulse her. Now they were going to meet face-to-face, and she fully intended to tell him exactly what she thought of him.

On and on Mima ran—to keep Rumi safe and to put that creep in his place.

Before Mima stood a Daruma Shipping distribution center. The facility's broad, metal gates were closed up, their bars offering a view of several dozen large trucks stationed in a large parking lot. Circling the grounds was a long stonework wall dotted with an occasional red-tinted light. The former K-TV studio building was just on the other side.

Still running, Mima followed the wall. There were few streetlights in this part of Azabu; she couldn't run at full speed, since she couldn't make out the ground at her feet. Only the dim red lights ahead served to guide her way to the studio.

Suddenly, the wall ended, revealing the former TV building in the distance. Against the dark night sky, the building formed an even blacker silhouette, a long flat slab reminiscent of a giant crocodile. Mima ran straight for the crocodile's great black mouth.

The studio hadn't been used for three years. About a year ago, she'd heard that the building was going to be torn down and replaced with a shopping and recreation center.

Mima climbed the stairs to the front entrance. Crisscrossed chains barred shut the sliding glass doors; a sign read NO TRESSPASSING. Cobwebs and dust had accumulated along the doors' upper track. No one had been in or out for months. Mima peered in through the glass and saw nothing but a deep darkness. She wondered if the building even had working electricity.

Mima circled around to the rear entrance. It, too, was chained up. Only the emergency exit off to its side was unlocked. That door stood half open.

That must have been where the man had gone in.

Mima readied herself and opened the door wide. The hinges released a metallic shriek that spurred her onwards.

A pungent, musty smell greeted her nostrils. At her feet lay messy piles of scrap lumber and cardboard. The hallway had become just another storage space.

It was dark; Mima could hardly see anything at all. She proceeded down the corridor slowly, taking care not to trip over anything. After a little while, a faint light spilled out from a side passage.

Her eyes had become so adjusted to the dark that even that faint light seemed eye-piercingly bright.

Drawn in by the light, Mima came into a room.

It was a green room. Mirrors with little counters lined the side walls, and a sink stood at the back. Hanging from the ceiling was the source of the light, a fluorescent tube in a yellowed, dangling ballast.

Did that mean the building's power was on?

While Mima squinted up at the light, a voice came from behind her. "I brought a portable generator," the man explained.

Mima gave a start and turned around. The man was standing there. Mima took a good look at him. *This is him. This is that freak.*

"Finally, we meet," he said. His smile chilled her to the core; it put a burr in the pit of her stomach.

The man had long and greasy hair, cow-like eyes, and lips that were much too red. As she inspected his face, she felt the terror of minutes ago begin to creep its way back over her. Mima tried to guess what this man had in store for her, and the question made every hair on her body stand on end.

The man said, "Mima-san, look at this."

He pointed to the T-shirt he was wearing. When she saw what was on it, her eyes went wide.

It was a character from an anime TV show called *Be an Idol!*, which had heavily featured Mima in its advertising. Once her involvement had finished, she'd had little enough reason to think about the show—but she remembered the T-shirt. It was a prize from a promotional giveaway held when the anime first aired.

The man puffed out his chest with pride. "I've kept really good care of it."

Then he took a step toward Mima.

The idol took a step back. She asked, "What about Rumi? Where is she?"

The man furrowed his eyebrows and muttered, slightly disappointed, "Mima-san. You were two minutes late."

Mima slumped to the floor. “You—you killed her? Did you really kill her?”

The man suddenly burst into a gleeful belly laugh. When the laughter subsided, he made a gesture with his hand.

From behind him, Rumi appeared. “M-Mima-san,” she said.

“Rumi-chan!” Mima ran to her as they called out each other’s names. “Rumi-chan, you’re all right!”

The two women hugged each other tight.

The man gave another chuckle. “I’m sorry to have given you such a scare. I was never going to kill her. All that matters is that you came. Beyond that, she means nothing to me.” He spread his arms wide. “Now, you’re probably wanting to know why I summoned you here. Isn’t that right?”

Still holding on to Rumi, Mima glared at her tormentor. “I am,” she said. “I very much want to know why you’ve done this to us.”

The man’s gaze turned distant as he said, “I wanted to protect you.”

He reached for a paper shopping bag that was sitting on the floor and pulled it over to him. From inside, he retrieved a poster. “This is a life-sized poster of you, Mima-san. It’s from when you made your debut.” He unrolled the sheet. “You were so adorable back then.”

He caressed Mima’s printed face gently. She felt it as if were her real flesh he was stroking. A chill ran through her body.

“I wanted to make you remain as you were then,” he explained. “I wanted to keep you as you were. That’s why I called you all those times. I even wrote you. But no matter what I did, you insisted on changing.”

Rumi pushed Mima’s arms away, then got to her feet. She walked up to the man and thrust a finger at him. “Just who the hell do you think you are, talking like that? It’s up to her if she wants to change or not change. What she does is none of your business!”

Mima took Rumi’s hand and pulled her back in, away from the man.

He gave Rumi a sharp look, quickly losing his temper. “Don’t—don’t upset me! I’m not saying any of this for my own good. This is for Mima.”

“And I’m saying it’s none of your business!” Rumi shouted. “I’ll make this as clear as I can. You’re no man; you’re a coward—from your creepy phone call harassment to your threatening letters… to the very way you *brought* us here!”

The man clutched his hands to his head. Weakly, almost whining at first, he said, “I… I… I wasn’t calling to harass her. I could never have gone to such great lengths simply to bother her. I’m only thinking of what’s best for Mima-san. I’d do anything to save her. Those phone calls came from a place of sincere devotion. I even took off Ochiai Eri’s skin for her!”

Rumi’s face turned white. “You…took off Ochiai Eri’s skin?”

But the man was still talking. He pressed his hands around Mima’s. “You remember this place, don’t you? This is where you gave your first performance of your debut song, ‘Innocence Forever!’ You wore a white cardigan and a yellow flared skirt. You were the picture of cute. And that *ending*! Cherry blossom petals filled the stage, and you finished in this stance.”

The man struck a pose, his arms and legs bent, backside sticking out a little. It was too surreal, repulsive, a sight from a nightmare—this dingy man striking a pop idol’s pose in this dingy room. Reflexively, Mima looked away.

The man said, “The flower petals danced about in the wind, just like Mima-san’s flared skirt; the fluttering edge suggested a glimpse of her panties but never truly revealed one. To this day, I can remember the excitement, my heart beating in my chest.”

He continued. “*That’s* the Mima-san I want to remain. That’s my only desire.”

He looked at Mima and then to Rumi. “But Mima-san changed. It was a shame, but she changed. And once someone changes, it’s hard to get them back the way they were. Even so, it’s not too late. I’ve resolved to bring Mima-san back to her proper course—clearly my old passive methods, like the letters and calls, won’t do anymore. I admit I maybe went a little overboard with how I brought you here, but it needed to be done.”

The man withdrew a knife from the shopping bag. The blade’s tip gleamed in the dull light.

Rumi gasped. Mima positioned herself between Rumi and the man.

He said, “I truly, truly am Mima-san’s fan. My adoration for her is pure. Untainted. I’ve never touched myself to her, not even once. I would even *die* for her.”

The man’s thick red tongue came out and passed across his lips. As he spoke, the obsession shone brighter in his eyes.

“Mima-san, do you understand the purity of my feelings for you? You really understand, don’t you? Don’t you think it’s wonderful for a person to be so pure of heart he’s willing to die for someone he loves? Mima-san, I know you understand the purity of my feelings, because that’s who you used to be. When you debuted as an idol, you were innocent—like *me*. My purity, my innocence, those are what you need, now more than ever.”

Mima and Rumi paid little attention to the speech. Instead, their thoughts were focused on finding an opening for escape. But just now, they sensed that if they moved even a hair’s breadth, that massive knife would claim their lives—and so they kept stone still.

“I’ve thought about this very seriously,” the man was saying. “If Mima and I became as one, then Mima would be able to forever remain the same Mima she used to be. My soul and her body—that would do perfectly, wouldn’t you agree? And so I thought long and hard. How could I bring us to that perfect union? I thought and I thought—and I found the answer.”

The man opened his beady eyes as far as he could manage, his face that of a man lost in dreams.

“It goes like this—I’ll take off my skin.” He paused, then said, “You heard me right. I’ll take off my skin—from my face all the way down to my waist. Then, Mima, I’ll take off *your* skin. You can figure out where it goes from there.” As he inspected his knife’s edge, he added, “Rumi-chan, you can figure it out, too, can’t you?”

Rumi’s lips trembled as she said, “You’re—you’re insane. You’re *insane*!” She clung to Mima from behind.

The man looked at Rumi as if she were the one talking nonsense. “I’m not insane. I’ve never been more clear headed. So. Right now, I’m going to remove my skin. Then I will do the same to Mima. After that, I’ll

put her skin over my face and body. On the outside, we'll be Mima. On the inside, we'll be me. We two will be one. The Kirigoe Mima of today will go back to being the Kirigoe Mima of her debut."

The man laughed. "This makes me so happy. I've never felt this happy before." Carried away by his emotions, the man kept on laughing. As he did so, he turned his back on them.

Mima saw her chance.

She squeezed Rumi's hand and whispered in her ear. "Listen to me. We're going to run away. I'll count to three, and then we run."

Rumi's face was pale, but she nodded.

"Okay. One… Two… Three!"

At the same time, Mima and Rumi took off running, fleeing out the door and into the darkened hallway.

"Damn!" the man said—and then he was after them with astounding speed.

In her panic, Mima lost control of her footing and collided into a wall. The next instant, the man's hands were on her back. With incredible strength, he pulled her into him, wrapped his arms around her, and hauled her back into the green room.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. "Let go of me! You say you're my fan, don't you? Then let me *go*."

Grumbling under his breath, the man tossed her over by the sink at the rear of the room. He was retrieving a spool of brown packing tape from his bag when Rumi came back in.

Mima shouted, "No, Rumi! Stay away. Save yourself!"

Rumi ignored her and charged at the man, who promptly clubbed her on the back of the skull with the butt of his knife. The woman grunted and collapsed in a heap.

The man pried up the edge of the tape with his fingernails and gave Mima a grin. "All right, hold out your hands. Ah, and no more running. If you don't do as I say, I'll stab Rumi until you listen. Now be a good girl and hold out those hands."

Closing her eyes in acquiescence, the idol thrust her arms out in front of her.

Moving quickly, the man wrapped the tape around her wrists, then laid her down on the floor, where he bound her ankles together in the same style.

“Good,” he said. “Now you won’t be going anywhere. I need you to be patient for a little while, but it’ll be over before you know it. I got *plenty* of practice peeling up Ochiai Eri.”

The man tapped the flat edge of his knife against his cheek and showed Mima a chilling smile. “I go first. I want you to watch this, Mima. This is how deep my devotion is for you.”

The moment he finished talking, he pushed the knife’s tip into the bottom of his scalp. Then, in a single motion, he traced around the side of his face until he reached his chin. With a sickening wet sound, a thin incision formed in his skin.

“Arrggh!” the man cried. “Ouch… Oh, this hurts. But I can take it.”

Again the man put the knife’s tip at the middle of his hairline, then made an identical cut down the opposite side of his face.

He adjusted his grip and began another incision, from the base of his neck to the top of his shoulder. The man’s howls of pain echoed through the darkened hallways. With each scream came another splatter of bright red blood.

“Mima, are you watching this? It must look painful, I know. But it’s not that bad. As long as I avoid cutting any nerves, the pain isn’t too terrible. What really hurts is when I peel away the skin. What I learned from Ochiai Eri was that it’s best not to be overly cautious about it. Here, watch this. It’s better just to tear it off quickly—like *this*.”

The man put his hands to the sagging skin of his face and *yanked*. With a sound like shredding rubber, his outer layer began to separate. Blood sprayed from his face, from his neck, even from his shoulders.

Moaning, groaning, with his skin in his hands, he turned to Mima. His face had been completely peeled, and his shoulders were well on their way.

The man’s white T-shirt was painted red, his jeans sopping wet.

Mima tried to look away, but even as she tried, her eyes were inexorably drawn back to him. Attached here and there to the back side of the torn-off skin were clumps of flesh dotted with white fatty tissue.

As strange as the thought was, amid this horrific, stomach-turning ritual, the sight reminded Mima of a bug shedding its chrysalis to emerge a butterfly.

## II

“This is odd,” Tadokoro said with a frown.

“Very odd,” Murano Yuji agreed.

The lights were on, the cooking underway, and Rumi and Mima were gone.

“The door was unlocked, too,” Tadokoro said. He’d been to Mima’s apartment dozens of times, but never had he known her to leave without locking up. “Something might have happened.”

The manager began searching the room. After a moment, Yuji called to him from the entryway. “I found something.”

Tadokoro ran over to the photographer, who held a scrap of paper.

“What is it?” Tadokoro asked. “Did she leave a note?”

Yuji spread open the paper. Scrawled on it in pencil were the words, “Old K-TV.”

The photographer scratched his head as he tried to work out what the note meant. “K-TV used to have a studio over in Azabu, didn’t they?”

Tadokoro thought about it a short while, then suddenly lifted his head. He looked to Yuji and said, “We need to go—*now*. To the old K-TV station. I’ve got the feeling something bad is going on.”

Tadokoro and Yuji ran into the darkness of the night.

# III

In the scarlet mask, two eyes stared at Mima.

Mima stared right back at them.

The singer was struck by how repulsive the human face was without skin to hide it. The structure of the man's flesh was laid open to the world. His eyeballs were exposed, almost wholly round. Two red holes remained where his nose had once been. With no lips, his teeth were bared down to his gums.

Mima thought, *He's not a human anymore. He's a monster—a monster of red flesh.*

He was on his hands and knees, creeping toward her. The man opened and closed his jaw as he spoke to Mima. His voice was oddly wispy, like that of a toothless old woman, and his words were hard to make out.

"Your skin comes off next," he said.

The skin from his shoulders drooped down over his chest. Every time he slinked another step closer, the tissue flapped about.

With her wrists and ankles still bound by tape, she pushed with her arms and legs to get away from him. Curling her body up tightly, she slowly, slowly, backed herself toward the sink. All too soon, she had nowhere left to go. Her back was against the wall.

Mima was out of ideas.

The mass of blood and flesh that used to be a man was drawing nearer and nearer, and in his hand, he still held the knife.

"Your skin comes off next, Mima-san." The man laughed weakly. "Your skin… I'll take off your skin…"

He was getting even closer now. Not even two meters separated them. If she didn't do anything, she knew she would die.

Desperately, she looked around her, seeking any avenue of escape. But her hands and feet were still bound by tape. Even if she somehow found an opening, she wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

The man was right on her.

Mima despaired. This was how her life would end—being skinned alive by a monster.

She felt his sticky hand grasp her leg. “I’ve got you,” he said. His teeth chattered. Was that his laugh? Was he delighted by her supple skin? In one last attempt to resist him, she curled up her legs and shook off his hand.

Slowly, the man lifted himself up, before pouncing on top of her. He adjusted his grip on the knife and placed its tip against her face.

Reflexively, Mima closed her eyes.

She heard a dull *thunk*, and the man fell over.

Fearfully, Mima opened her eyes and saw him stooped over, head clutched in his hands. She looked up and saw Rumi standing behind him. In her hands was an industrial-sized bottle of facial lotion.

“Rumi-chan!” Mima said.

“I’m glad I made it in time,” Rumi said. She ran to Mima’s side and tore through the tape at her wrists and ankles.

The man was still holding his head while letting out low moans of pain.

“We have to hurry,” Rumi said. “Before he gets back up.”

Mima stretched out her freed arms and legs, then slapped Rumi on the back and said, “Let’s go!”

Just as they began running for the door, the man grunted and leaped past them. In a single, powerful frog-like bound, he crossed from the sink to the doorway. He was no longer a man, but a monster.

Mima and Rumi backed into a corner.

Anger contorted the flesh that used to be the man’s face as he glared at the two women. “You’re breaking my heart,” he said, tears spilling from his eyes. As he cried, his body convulsed, perhaps due to the salt in his tears touching exposed nerves.

“You’re breaking my heart,” he repeated. “Here I am, offering you my complete devotion. But you give me nothing. Why? *Why*?”

The man's entire body writhed in agony. "Well," he said, "it doesn't matter what you want. I'm taking that pretty skin."

The man slashed at the air with his knife before moving in toward Mima. He held his arms outstretched to block any path of escape.

*What can we do?* Mima's mind went on overdrive. *How can we escape this demon?*

She pointed to the left and shouted, "Rumi, run that way!"

Without hesitation, Rumi ran, circling to the left of the man, toward the doorway. The man turned and moved to intercept her, giving Mima the opening to run to the right.

The movement caught his attention, and he turned his head to look—thus failing to catch either woman.

They both fled through the doorway and emerged into the darkened hall. Mima headed for the emergency exit, but Rumi stopped her.

"We can't go that way," Rumi said. "He chained up the door after you came in. He'll catch us before we could ever hope to get it open."

Mima turned back the other way and ran into the pitch black. Rumi kept right on her heels.

The man's head popped out from the green room. Gnashing his teeth in rage, he hollered after them, "This's how it's going to be, is it? No matter what I do, you refuse to see things my way. *Fine*—I won't count on your cooperation. I had hoped to take your skin while you were still alive, but I no longer have that luxury. You got that, you two?"

He kept shouting into the darkness. "Do you hear me? I'm done holding back! The first one of you I catch is going to be the first to die by this knife. You'd better run like your lives depend on it!"

Mima and Rumi could see hardly anything at all. They gripped each other tightly by the hand, walking one step at a time.

Sounding disheartened, Rumi said, "If this is as fast as we can go, won't he catch us any moment now? He said he's going to kill us. What are we going to do?"

“Don’t talk like that, Rumi-chan. He’s stuck going slow, just like us. You can’t give up. We’ll just keep looking for a way out of here.”

They continued slowly into the unknown darkness.

For the first time, Mima appreciated just how unsettling the dark could be. There was nothing pleasant about the thought of that skinless monster pursuing them through the hazardous piles of boards and glass and scattered debris that had slowed them to a crawl. Yet still, she found the courage to press on, ever forward.

Several times, they heard a bump or clatter behind them. Each noise nearly sent their hearts leaping from their chests, but none of them seemed to come from their hunter.

Rumi let out a small yelp of surprise. Her hand had been following the wall, but it suddenly opened into empty space. She moved her hand around and determined it was some kind of doorway. The door had been left open.

Rumi sidled next to the frame and reached her arm around to feel along the inside wall. It wasn’t long until her fingers found a light switch.

“I’m turning on the light,” she said and did just that. The room lit up.

It was a locker room with large lockers lining the walls.

“Rumi-chan!” Mima hissed. She took the woman by the arm and pulled her inside the room. “You shouldn’t have turned on the lights. Now he’ll know where we are.”

Hope drained from Rumi’s face. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m going to lead him right to us. I’m sorry, Mima-san. I’m so sorry. Oh, what have I done…”

Mima held up a palm to cut her off. She spoke calmly. “Blaming yourself won’t get us anywhere. We’re going to hide in these lockers. We’ll lock them from the inside.”

The idol picked a nearby locker at random and got inside.

Though flustered, Rumi chose a locker for herself and latched it from the within. The two women stilled themselves and quieted their breathing.

The inside of Mima's locker was dark and smelled strongly of rust and mildew. A few ventilation slits let in slashes of light and offered a full view of the locker room.

Both women watched nervously through the openings.

As they had feared, the man came in not long after.

Again, Mima was horror-stricken by the man's ghastly appearance, red flesh exposed on face and body. Hunched over, shoulders rocking, with his crimson visage thrust forward, he seemed more demon than man. As he advanced into the room, step by ponderous step, he casually tapped the flat of his blade against his cheek. He appeared to be enjoying the sensation of the metal against his open flesh.

As if to himself, the man said, "This is where they decided to hide?" His voice leaked out from his nose and took on an unnatural quality. "They must be in these lockers. How dumb can you get? Of all the places they could have gone, they picked a room with nowhere to hide. Well, I guess I'll just check the lockers one by one."

He put his hand to the locker closest to the door. He grasped the handle and rattled it, while Mima watched through the air holes in her locker.

The man muttered, "It won't open," and began kicking at the compartment.

Then he put his knife up to a ventilation slit and pushed the blade inside.

Mima winced in imagined pain. Was he going to stick that knife into every locker?

The openings were precisely at eye level. Mima pictured his knife coming into her locker, body shivering.

Now he thrust the knife into the second locker.

The man grumbled, "Not in this one, either."

It seemed he intended to perform that grim test on every locker in the room.

Mima had hidden herself in the sixth one from the door. The math was as simple as it was inescapable: four more and the knife would come for her.

More than anything, she wanted to scream, but she desperately fought down the urge. Her legs began to shake. Rumi's locker was at a diagonal opposite hers. Inside that locker, Rumi likely faced the same maddening terror.

"Not in this one, either," the man said, his voice sounding irritated, now.

He stood in front of the fourth locker and tried the handle. The door swung open with no resistance. The man clicked his tongue. "And not in this one."

His hand was on the handle of the fifth locker. He yanked the door open.

He groaned. "Not in here."

He turned his goggling eyes toward Mima, and their gaze met through the gaps in the locker door.

With heavy, inhuman breaths, he approached.

Mima held both hands tightly around the inside workings of the handle to keep it from moving. As before, the man rattled the handle. Mima held on with all her might, and somehow, somehow she managed to keep the door closed.

The man said, "I know you're in there. Stop resisting and open that door." As he kept furiously pulling at the handle, his voice raised to a shout. "Open it! Open it now!"

Mima held the handle closed, her life in her grasp. The metal dug into her fingers until they bruised and swelled. But Mima held her grip.

The man gave up. He released the handle, and then drove the tip of the knife through the ventilation holes.

Reflexively, Mima pressed herself into the back corner. The sharp edge of the blade rushed past her eyes and then back out again.

“I know you’re in there,” the man said. “If you don’t open that door right now, I’ll cut your face with this knife. You have nowhere to go, and I’m not leaving until you come out.”

Mima knew he was right. If she didn’t do something to change the situation, that knife was cutting into her one way or the other. She had to do something—but what?

Before Mima could finish the thought, the knife came through the center slat, and then again, and again. The blade scraped against the metal door with a terrible screech.

Mima made herself as small as she could, but there was only so much she could do.

Again and again, the knife’s tip passed perilously close to her forehead. Once, the blade even brushed her bangs.

The stress and fear had pushed Mima’s mind to the limit. Her nerves were an overinflated balloon, ready to burst at a single pinprick. If that knife pushed through those slits one more time, it could very well be the pin to end it all—to end *her*.

*I’m trapped in this tiny locker,* she thought. *I have nowhere to run. Even if I had a way out, I hardly have the will to take it.*

A desperate thought crossed her mind. If her fate was to be anointed by that killer’s knife while trapped in that locker, she’d rather open the door and face him. She’d rather put up a fight than silently await an inevitable death.

Having found her resolve, she began to turn the handle.

Just then, a crashing sound broke the silence. The man jumped in surprise before turning to the source of the disturbance. Mima looked the same direction.

The door of one locker, diagonally across, was standing open. Rumi stood within it, her eyes so wide they showed white all around.

*She couldn’t handle it any longer*, Mima thought. *She couldn’t stay waiting in the darkness.*

For a moment, Rumi’s sudden appearance had startled the man into stunned stillness, but he quickly recovered and came swinging the knife at

Rumi.

Rumi’s wide eyes popped open even wider. She shrieked and flapped her arms like a chicken and fled from the locker room.

The man laughed through his lipless mouth and ran right after her.

# Chapter 9
# REVERSAL

## I

Rumi ran blindly through the pitch-black halls, striking a wall here, tripping over a desk there. None of that mattered. She kept on running in full panic.

Each time she fell, her hands came up pricked with glass shards and wooden splinters, but she hardly felt any pain. Running with such reckless desperation, she finally seemed to have lost the man. For a while, she had heard his breathing at her back, but it was gone now.

At last, she arrived at the green room near the emergency exit. Relief flooded her. The dim light offered respite from utter darkness. Here, she could manage to calm her nerves.

Rumi sat down in a chair and let her shoulders drop. She looked down at her feet and saw pools of blackened blood that had accumulated in little mounds on the floor, congealed into something like coffee jelly. She hadn't known that blood could pile up like that.

This was that freak's blood. He had removed his own skin—*his own skin*. And then he tried to skin Mima-san.

No matter how much he loved idols, how could that passion have brought a man to do what he had done? He was a freak. And not just *any* freak, but one of total and unparalleled monstrosity.

Rumi remained seated in the chair for a time, but eventually she began to fear his sudden appearance, and the thought of it compelled her to her feet once more.

*I have to get out of here as quickly as I can,* Rumi thought.

She popped her head out the door and searched for any sign of the man's presence. She strained her ears for the sound of his breathing or his footsteps rustling in the dark.

She heard nothing.

Realizing that this was her chance, Rumi decided to run for the emergency exit—but something inside her held her back.

*Mima-san*, she thought. She couldn't leave Mima-san here to her fate and only save herself.

And so she remained in that room.

She returned to the chair and considered what course of action would best help Mima. She could stay in the TV studio building, find Mima, and face the man together. That was one option. But it wasn't one she saw ending in their victory.

Instead, Rumi could escape the building and find help, whether from Tadokoro or the police. The more she thought about it, the more that seemed like the best choice.

She made up her mind, and in the next moment, she was out of the room.

*Swish!*

Something cut through the air directly in front of her face.

The knife's edge glinted amid the darkness. The man was there.

Rumi recoiled and fell into the shadows at the edge of the hallway.

The man stood silhouetted by the green room's dim light. "I *told* you you couldn't run," he said in his wheezing voice. "You'll never escape me."

He brandished the knife and said, "I'll start with you. I'll kill you first, and then I'll take your skin. Then Mima will be next. If you're wondering why I'm going to kill you first, it's simple. I always save the tastiest bite for last."

He swung the knife down at her.

Rumi rolled to the side, dodging the strike. The knife just barely grazed the side of her stomach.

Holding a hand to the wound, Rumi shakily got to her feet. A single streak of blood ran through her fingers.

The man changed his grip on the knife and came at her with a horizontal slash, aimed at her face. Instinctively, Rumi jerked to the side; the knife passed millimeters from her cheek.

The man grunted in frustration and began to swing the knife with crazed abandon.

With her eyes locked on his, Rumi moved away. She took a step back, and her heel caught on something—a piece of scrap wood.

Rumi lost her balance, twisting sideways as she tumbled to the floor.

The man straddled her, pinning her shoulders down with his knees. He gripped his knife with both hands and raised the weapon high.

Rumi tried to shake him off of her—she wrenched her body with all her strength—but the man didn't budge.

Within his mask of flesh, the man's eyes glimmered with anticipation. He shouted, "Say goodbye!" and swung the knife down.

Rumi grabbed his wrists with both hands. But still the knife kept coming. With her hands still on his wrists, she turned her head to the side.

The knife grazed past her face, leaving a small cut beneath her earlobe before striking against the floor.

The man clicked his tongue, then took another stab at her face. This time, Rumi rocked her shoulders, throwing off his aim, and the blade left another shallow cut at the base of her neck.

A thin spray of blood spurted out and painted the man's eyeballs red.

The man grunted and cursed, then grabbed Rumi by the chin with his left hand. "Let's see you try and move your head *now!*" he cried.

He raised the knife once more.

This time, Rumi was finished. She closed her eyes in resignation.

The next moment, a flash brought daylight to the room.

The man covered his eyes with his hand. For just an instant, he slackened his hold—but it was just enough time for Rumi to free herself from under him.

Once she had, she saw two figures standing behind him.

Simultaneously, the figures shouted, “Rumi!” and “Rumi-chan!”

Rumi gasped. “Tadokoro-san, Yuji-san…”

She slipped past the man and staggered to their side. Tadokoro caught her in his arms. Yuji discarded the camera he was holding and embraced her from behind.

As she gave herself over to the safety of their arms, she realized that the burst of light had come from Yuji-san’s camera flash. Rumi turned to look at the photographer when suddenly she screamed.

Standing just behind Yuji was the man, and in his hand was the knife.

The moment Rumi screamed, Yuji spun to confront him, squaring off against the unearthly monster with the skinless face.

Without any hesitation, Yuji lowered his center of gravity and rushed at him, ducking around the knife. Yuji drove his shoulder into the man’s solar plexus and tackled him with such force that the photographer could have been mistaken for an American linebacker.

The man grunted and spewed frothy blood from his lipless mouth. He teetered for a moment before falling over forward, knife still in hand. It was on that knife he landed. It drove into his throat, right near his Adam’s apple.

Coughing up massive amounts of blood, redness leaking through his teeth, the man rose unsteadily to his feet. Even with the knife jutting from his throat, he came on, shuffling zombielike toward the three. A normal person would certainly have died by now, but this was a monster, beyond the rules of nature.

Yuji crouched again. He aimed his shoulder carefully, then tackled once again, sending the man flying back.

The man tumbled into the darkness of the hallway. He struck the wall, head cracking against it in impact.

This time, he remained still.

Attempting a reassuring smile, Yuji said, “Rumi-chan, are you all right?”

Her face a mess, Rumi leaned against the cameraman, who gently put his arms around her. She asked, “Is he dead? Tell me he’s dead.”

“He’s dead,” Yuji said, softly brushing her hair. “You don’t need to worry anymore. Look, he’s not moving.”

Tadokoro asked with concern in his voice, “Where’s Mima? Did anything happen to her?”

Rumi’s eyes went wide. Her sudden rescue had pushed Mima from her mind.

She looked up at Tadokoro and said, “I think she’s all right. But she’s probably still running around the building trying to escape that monster. She has no way of knowing he’s dead. She’s probably terrified right now, the poor thing….”

Yuji said, “Tadokoro-san, let’s find the main breaker and get the power back on in this place. We need light first.” He gritted his teeth. “This musty darkness is too depressing.”

## II

Mima felt herself floating in the air.

A moment later, her body slammed against the concrete floor. With the wind knocked out of her, she remained still for a minute, nursing her pain.

It was too dark for her to see anything, but she knew she had fallen down some steps—four or five, she thought. She imagined what could have happened had it been a whole flight of stairs, and the terror of the thought made all the hairs on her body stand on end.

At the top of the steps, she could see the faint outline of an object, but nothing more. This was as close to total darkness as it could get, as if the air itself had turned to black.

Mima got on her hands and knees and proceeded slowly, feeling about with her hands, searching for more steps or other dangerous obstacles in her path.

After a short time, her hand touched something. The object was firm and round and about the size of a rugby ball. Here and there it had little

bumps and valleys, and on the top there was something akin to hair.

It seemed to be a mannequin head.

She searched around with her hands and quickly found several more of the heads scattered about. Apparently, Mima was in some kind of storage area.

Now that she thought about it, she recalled seeing a male idol singing some song with several mannequins behind him. The props had likely been left behind after the recording.

Next to the mannequin heads was a pile of scrap lumber, which Mima suspected had been used to construct the set. She circled around the lumber pile to proceeded ahead, but her way was soon blocked by a large object that occupied the floor.

Her hand brushed against its cold metal surface. Feeling around, she found a large, curving metal fin, and then several more. Mima quickly concluded it was a giant industrial fan used for special effects. The fan must have tipped over flat on its back.

She had seen this fan before, during the taping of her song, “Innocence Forever!” The machine had been used to blow the cherry blossoms through the air.

Mima found herself flooded with memories of her debut. For a moment, all thoughts of that stalker left her mind, and she relived the path her career had taken her and the emotions she’d felt along the way.

Some of it had been painful. Some of it had been sad. But those were outnumbered by times of fun and happiness.

*I’m not sorry I became an idol*, she convinced herself in the dark.

Tadokoro and Yuji supported Rumi on either side as the three went deeper into the studio building.

Holding out a disposable lighter to light the way, the manager said, “The breaker room should be downstairs, if I remember right.”

Together, they searched for a staircase down.

## III

Mima’s body went stiff.

She could hear a strange sound. It was like a giant cockroach rustling across the floor.

Was it Rumi?

Mima dismissed the idea. Though she had no proof, she knew it wasn’t.

Mima kept moving, trying to put distance between her and the source of the noise.

Along with the scratching crawl, she started to hear something that sounded like a person trying to clear their throat. Whatever the thing was, it was alive.

Mima felt her knees go weak. The only living things in the building were her, Rumi, and that man. If the sound wasn’t coming from her or Rumi, that only left one answer: him.

Mima forced strength back into her legs and kept crawling ahead, hand by hand and foot by foot. She moved as carefully as she could to keep from stirring up any noise that would give her location away.

But no matter how quietly she moved, she couldn’t silence the rustling of her clothes. In the pitch-black stillness, the sound of fabric brushing against fabric seemed to echo through the void.

Suddenly, that giant cockroach sound intensified. There was no doubt: it was closing in.

He had found her.

From somewhere behind came a voice that sounded like it was coughing up blood.

“Mi… ma…”

If she had had any doubts as to who it was, they were now gone. It was him. It was that skinless monstrosity crawling toward her through the dark.

Urged forward by that voice, Mima kept moving.

Out of nowhere, Mima felt her sense of balance leave her. Even though she was still crawling on her hands and knees, her head began to spin.

She tried to figure out why that might be, when she realized the answer. It was the floor. At some point, the floor had begun to slope. She hadn't been able to see it in the darkness and the incline had upset her sense of balance.

Careful not to let herself become too dizzy, she proceeded up the slope. Eventually, she reached the top, and the floor became level again.

Still not sure where she was, Mima kept on going, propelled forward by the desperate need to get as far away from that man as she could.

At some point, she had lost her shoes, and just below the hem of her jumper dress, her kneecaps were covered in scrapes.

None of that stopped her. She kept moving forward, because moving forward was her only hope for survival.

For a moment, Mima's heart froze between beats.

She'd felt something clammy and sticky touching her calf. The thing wrapped around her leg and began to squeeze.

Mima knew what it was at once. It was that man's bloodied hand.

Mima kicked with her leg to try to free herself from his grasp.

The man's voice pierced into her eardrums. "Mi… Mima…" As he spoke, his voice gurgled like a drainpipe. "You can make my desires come true. Please. Make my… make my…"

Mima kicked into the void with both legs and hit the man harder than she'd expected.

The man grunted in pain.

While he was stunned, Mima got to her feet and tried to walk forward a few more paces, but her foot met with air where the floor should have been. She gasped and recovered her balance. There was no floor ahead.

Quickly, she realized why—or at least, she came up with a good guess.

The slope had led up to a stage, and this was the stage's edge.

Mima momentarily considered leaping down. It might not be that long a fall. But Mima stopped any such thought.

Jumping down would be her last resort. Until then, she would try to fight the man on the stage.

Just as she resolved herself to fight, the man's hands came down on her shoulders.

Rumi called out, "Yuji-san, over here! Is this the main breaker?"

Up on the wall, in a storage space filled with mannequin heads, lay a large breaker panel. Yuji came over and opened the green metal door. Bringing the lighter's flame up close, he examined the dusty switches within. Toward the bottom right, one switch stood out as noticeably larger than the others.

"This must be it," Yuji said, flicking the switch to the ON position.

Light flooded the building.

## IV

Without warning, everything became too bright to see. Mima reflexively closed her eyes. With her vision adjusted to the total darkness, the light felt as painfully bright as if she'd stared directly into the sun.

Slowly, she cracked open her eyelids and saw a mass of red flesh in front of her. It was him. That skinless man. To her horror, his knife was embedded deep in his throat.

He opened his eyes and stared at her.

Mima shook his hands from her shoulders and tried to escape, but there was nowhere for her to go.

They were standing on a long, narrow stage with a slope at its far end. Including the ramp, the stage extended a few dozen meters. Mima's back was to the opposite edge, where the surrounding floor opened to the basement below.

The man laughed, gurgling through the blood in his throat. "This is the end, Mima," he said. "What a delight this is. At last, my dream is coming true. You look surprised, Mima. Are you wondering how I'm still alive? My skin has been cut off, I've lost all this blood, and a knife is even in my throat, and yet I still live. You have to be wondering how that's possible. I bet you are."

Mima nodded once. She really *was* wondering that.

"Well, Mima, I'll tell you. I'll tell you how I'm still alive, even like this. It's because I want your skin. That's what's keeping me alive. I won't die until I've cut off your skin!"

The man put both hands around the hilt of the knife and yanked it free. His throat made an inhuman, burbling, choking sound, and a blob of congealed blood came out along with the knife. The blood slid down the blade, plopping to the stage.

Grunting in a sound that wasn't quite a voice, the man staggered toward Mima, as if mustering the last vestiges of his strength.

In the basement below the stage, Tadokoro and Yuji came running.

"Look out!" Tadokoro shouted.

Mima looked down at them.

"Mima!" Tadokoro called out. "In front of you!"

Mima looked back up. Knife in hand, the man was trudging inexorably closer.

Mima was out of time. She yelled, "Bon-chan, switch on that fan. Switch on the fan below the stage!"

Tadokoro went to the fan and threw the lever with a loud *ka-chunk.*

The machine roared to noisy life. All six of its one-meter blades began to spin, sending up years of accumulated dust along with tiny paper

cherry blossoms.

Behind Mima, several blossoms danced in the air.

The man stopped. For one moment, he saw Kirigoe Mima as she had been in her debut. Tears began to stream from his eyes.

Mima spoke to him. “I understand now,” she said. “I won’t ever change. I’m still that same woman.”

The man gave her a small nod, but the next moment his was shaking his head furiously.

“No,” he said. “You’re not her anymore. Only your face is still her. On the inside, you’re rotten.” The man glared at her. He gripped the knife with both hands and pointed the weapon at her face. “Stand still! I’m going to cut off your skin.”

Then he was charging toward her with terrible force.

Mima threw herself onto her side as the knife’s tip passed her by. As she fell, she hooked her leg around his, tripping him, and his momentum carried him onto his back. As he landed on the stage, the knife clattered from his hand, just beyond reach.

Mima got to her feet, then straddled atop the man as she reached for the knife. Just as her fingers were nearly on the weapon, the man grabbed her by the waist and pulled her into him.

Her face was right up against his; her nose touched his darkening red flesh and off-yellow fat. The man’s teeth chattered in an approximation of a laugh.

He wrapped his arms around her back. His lipless mouth closed in on her lips.

Mima stretched out her arm, blindly feeling for the knife. His mouth brushed against hers, and his sickly, foul breath enveloped her.

Mima’s fingertips found the knife.

Quickly, she took it in hand and thrust its blade into the exposed meat of his shoulder.

The man’s arms went limp.

Keeping the knife in her grasp, Mima stood up.

The man held a hand over his shoulder, swaying as he rose.

Mima shouted, “Stay away from me! If you come any closer, I’ll stab you.” She held the knife at the ready.

Ignoring her command, the man lunged toward her with outstretched arms.

Mima thrust the knife into his face. The blade sunk deeply into his right eye, spraying blood while the man coughed and burbled.

Mima wrenched the knife free and let out a startled gasp. The man’s eyeball had come out along with it, a gelatinous orb skewered on the tip of the blade, tendrils of its optical nerves clinging to the metal.

Reflexively, Mima dropped the knife. Her guts began to twitch, threatening to send up whatever was in her stomach. As she fought against the urge, Mima couldn’t help but ask, “Doesn’t that hurt?”

The man took up the knife, eyeball and all. “Of course it hurts. But what’s a little more pain? Just look at me. My face is torn off. I took a knife to the throat. The pain all runs together.”

His teeth chattered again. He shook his eyeball from the knife, before stabbing the blade into his own side.

He groaned a little, then said, “See? I can do that, and it hardly hurts at all. It won’t kill me, either. I couldn’t die now, even if I wanted to. Not until I have your skin.”

The man stepped toward Mima and spread out his arms in a magnanimous gesture. “I’ll make this quick and painless for you. So, no more running.” He held the knife aloft. “I’ll aim for your heart, since I’ll still have to take your skin off. I wouldn’t want to damage your face, after all.”

The knife came down at her as if in slow motion.

Mima took one step back, and her feet found the edge of the stage. She had nowhere left to run, no way to dodge his attack. The knife’s tip bore down. The man loomed tall above her. There was no slipping past him, now.

“Mima and I will be one!” the man shouted.

Death was barreling toward her. She had only one move left to make.

Mima ducked down quickly. The man leaned forward.

Mima planted her face into his stomach. He slumped across her back, and she took his weight, then twisted to the side.

The man rolled from her back and off the stage, where he plummeted down to the basement.

The man screamed as the giant fan-blades caught him.

The machine groaned. It shredded through flesh and bone, turning the man's arms into pulp. A moment later, the blades chopped his legs into a frothing slop. Then his waist was gone, then his stomach, then his chest.

For a brief eternity, his bloodstained head hung in the air.

To Mima's horror, his mouth opened wide and cried out, "Mi… ma…."

But then the head was sucked into the fan, butchered by its spinning blades.

The man's blood and flesh scattered everywhere, staining the white paper flowers red. Mima watched the bloodstained petals dance through the wind. As they passed by, they no longer resembled cherry blossoms. Instead, they looked like vivid red roses.

The passion, the *obsession*, of the so-called Darling Rose—stalker, freak, and monster—had been so strange that he had transformed the blossoms into rose petals.

At least, in that moment, that was how Mima saw it.

**END**

# AFTERWORD ‘91

For several years now, I’ve had an idea in my head—of a battle between a young pop idol and a twisted, obsessive fan.

As it happens, I’m a pop idol superfan (though not twisted and obsessive, of course…) and that gives me a particular understanding of how fanatics can become emotionally attached to idols.

The point I most wanted to emphasize in writing this story was what would happen if that devotion deepened to the utmost extreme. I especially wanted to write about what would result if that devotion was directed against one individual idol.

Kirigoe Mima, the main character of this story, represents a certain style of pure and innocent idol, while the antagonist, only referred to as “the man,” symbolizes the end result of a fan whose attachment grows unchecked.

Idol singers are constantly striving to improve their craft, hoping to graduate into the next phase of their career, while their devoted fans are drawn to and fixated on the idols’ youthful innocence. I wanted to speculate on the consequences of a head-on collision between those two conflicting ideals.

Because this story takes the form of a horror novel, that collision of aspirations manifests as a larger-than-life spectacle of violence and action, but the driving intent was to call to attention the vulnerability of an idol who has to deal with the all too plausible scenario of a fan becoming too obsessed to ignore.

As a writer, I hope that readers will approach this book with that layer of the story in mind. That said, the development of the plot is compelling enough on its own; if a reader simply enjoys this work as a straight thriller, that’s fine, too.

I look forward to hearing what people think after reading it.

—Yoshikazu Takeuchi
(while listening to

Noriko Sakai's *White Girl*)
March 25, 1991

# AFTERWORD ‘98

In the fall of last year (1997), I watched the anime adaptation of *Perfect Blue* at the Tokyo International Fantastic Film Festival.

I was deeply impressed by the beautiful, high quality animation projected on the big screen of the Shibuya Pantheon Theater, and the delight at seeing my own work nurtured and transformed into something so splendid brought tears to my eyes.

Of course, the journey from novel to motion picture came with many difficulties and took plenty of twists and turns along the way.

Thanks to the efforts of my esteemed friend Koichi Okamoto during development, the excellent script written by Sadayuki Murai, the presence of the brilliant up-and-coming director Satoshi Kon, the powerful backing of ONIRO and MADHOUSE studios, and the financial support of Rex Entertainment (without which none of it would have been possible), an outstanding psychological thriller was brought to life.

I came up with the plot for *Perfect Blue* more than ten years ago.

I’ve always been somewhat of a geeky type of guy. In my school days, I loved things like idols and kaiju. As they say about birds of a feather, I attracted a startling amount of fellow enthusiasts. We were the kind of guys who naturally got along well with each other, but no matter how much fun we had talking, I always felt somewhat out of place.

Looking back, I suspect it was a difference in intensity, a different level of passion for our shared interests. Some loved Godzilla, some saw Japanese ghost story movies as the pinnacle of artistic expression, some had an unusual affection for the young women who hosted children’s programs —and so on.

The deeper and more focused their enthusiasm became, the more genuine it got—and the more intensely I felt out of place. I started to wonder what unimaginable catastrophe would come about if their passions became as sharply pointed as the T-1000’s blade arm in *Terminator 2*, aimed at the subjects of their obsessions.

In that way, the seeds for the basic motif of *Perfect Blue*—the confrontation between idol and fanatic-turned-stalker—were planted in me more than twenty years ago.

—Yoshikazu Takeuchi
January 24, 1998

# AUTHOR BIO

Yoshikazu Takeuchi was born in 1955 in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. He began working in publishing before becoming a columnist and an author. In addition to having his creations adapted into film and video games, he is a successful radio and TV personality.

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